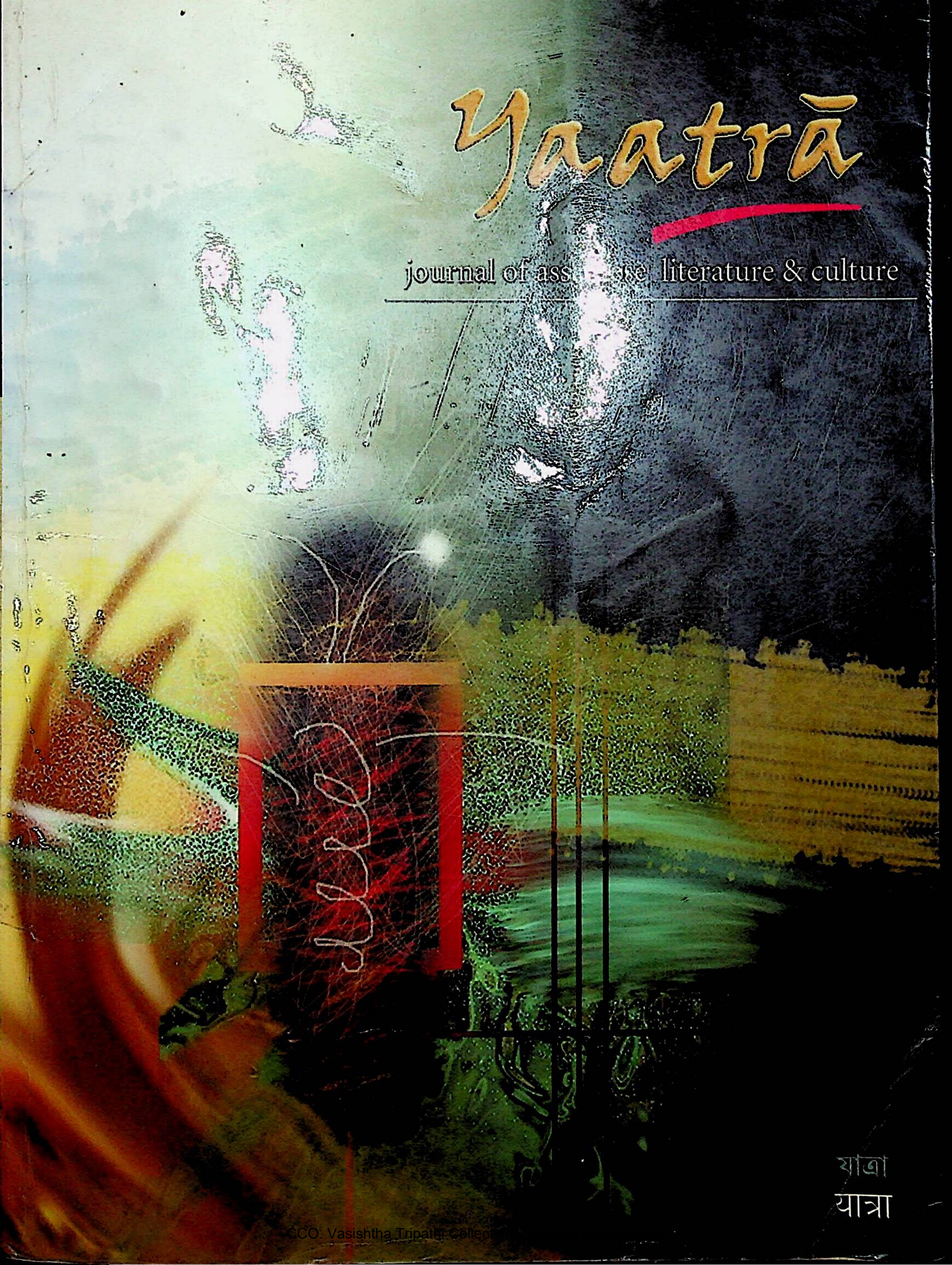
Yaatrā

journal of ass[illegible]se literature & culture



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contents

- **the edit page** 4
- **letter and comment** 5
- **birth of a dream:** ***inauguration of Yaatra*** 8
- **scrapbook** 14
- **'a relevant and welcome step'** 18
- **creative horizons : books & ...**

Nirode K Barooah pens a splendid history of 'forgotten people' 21
M.S. Prabhakara

poetry of scholarship - a look into Sankaradeva's role 24
D. N. B.

the joy and sorrow of creativity- the beautiful stories of Hemchandra Doley 26

trying to capture the beauty of Madhavadeva's hymns 29

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contents

- **the fictive world**

Saurav Kumar Chaliha and the quest of modernity 30

Saurav Kr. Chaliha
restless electron (*Tr. Dr. D.J. Borah*) 32

Apurba Sarma
night at baghe tapu (*Tr. Ruma Phukan*) 60

Harekrishna Deka
why yudhistir's story cannot be told 75
(*Tr. Mitra Phukan*)

Rabin Sarma
the mask (*Tr. Nirendra Nath Thakuria*) 86

Imran Hussain
the slaughter (*Tr. Ms. Atreyee Gohain*) 94

- **the abiding scene**

the first assamese sonnet
priyatomar chithi
Hemchandra Goswami (*Tr.Pradip Acharya*) 105

- **opposite concerns**

Kaustubh Kr. Deka
delving into the psyche of a 'people'- the assamese mind 106

Paramananda Majumdar
assamese: search for a national identity 115
(*Tr. Gautom K. Borah*)

- **reportage**

north-east authors' meet 121
Sudarshan Thakur

- **culture-sphere**

assamese school of painting 125
Samiran Boruah

A Note from the Publisher

On the advice of our well-wishers, we have decided to bring out *Yaatra* as a quarterly journal. All our valued subscribers who have subscribed for different periods will have their subscriptions extended.

The Dream : The Project

It looked like an impossible dream at the outset. A translation journal of Assamese literature and culture in English! A project with an absolutely nil commercial potential! But we thought a dream that is not tempered on the anvil of reality would always remain a wistful dream. And Assamese literature & cultural would remain unknown to the outside world. So we decided to proceed.

The Belief :

We always believed that we have really something to present – to showcase from the world for Arts in Assam.

The Mission :

The Mission that was born out of this belief is –

To present before the nation and the world the treasure of contemporary Assamese literature in English translation;

To popularise Assamese writing and writers on the National scene;

To build bridges of friendship and understanding among people, places, languages, cultures and generations.

'This is a mission of light and beauty. Be a part of it.'

Chairman,
The North East Foundation

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the source of the literary spring

Can we say that culture is essentially ethnic? The creative output and expression of a natural community of humankind ? Probably yes. Culture is a product of a particular people and surely belongs to them. The words 'ethnic' and 'natural community' have been consciously used in the context of literature and culture to maintain its distinction from such terms as nation, nation state, and also national culture, which essentially denote manmade historical and social constructs. Though these constructs are no less important, we must, however, realise that they are raised with building blocks gathered from various ethnic cultures through a process of inclusion, exclusion, imposition and mainly by mutual acceptance. And this process, though politically important, does not change the essential ethnic character of culture and literature even within the national amalgam.

Dealing with literature, one can possibly say that literature is thus always stamped with or rather born with the stamp of the collective consciousness of a community of people in which it is born. And this consciousness in turn is formed by the collective experience of the people. And therefore, to get the source of literature one must travel to the plane where such collective experience is gained and exists.

We must further realize that all people, big and small, all communities, all ethnic units have a very long, varied and rich tradition of literary output – only that it is not always written down.

The first literature of all peoples is oral and poetic.

This realm of oral literature is not to be confused with mere folklore whose dictionary meaning includes the ancient customs, the notions, beliefs, traditions, superstitions and prejudices of the common people; and which connotes an image of the ancient – the past times only, and ignores the modern – the present times. Oral literature can be called the rich treasure trove of accumulated and accumulating experiences, wisdom, realisations and sensibilities of a people. A writer has only to stand before it, try to see it, and he or she cannot help being awed by the richness, and the never-ending mysteries it unfolds. Can we not say that it is the accumulated gift of our ancestors? Generations of people that preceded us, even people who are present at the moment! They have stored their contributions, experiences, realisations and have put them away like a miser's hoards hidden in many layers that make up our collective consciousness as well as heritage. But it is always there for us – for us the writers to explore and use.

Many a time we writers have failed to see it, ignored it even when we saw, thought nothing about it. Often we have a vague uncomfortable awareness that it exists – an awareness tinged with a twinge of unspoken guilt. The question is: Have the writers searched for and brought this accumulated wisdom, this treasure trove of experience, this ever increasing store into the world of the 'written words' – the world of literature as we understand it? If we do so there would be no dearth of material and inspiration for literature – even for all those communities who do not have a written language or even a script of their own.

Writers of Assam and the North East (as well as the writers of all parts of India) are fortunate that this treasure trove has not yet been opened properly. Only a few have lifted the lid and taken a peep into it. In the world of Indian literature there is still virgin, uncharted ground, the unexplored frontiers for literature of today and tomorrow. Herein lies the source, the fountainhead, from where all human literary traditions flow. ❑

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Respected Dr. D.J. Borah

I am immensely pleased to see a well edited journal *'Yaatra'*, which features different shades and dimensions of Assamese Literature and Culture.

The bringing out a regional journal, from an area which possesses a distinctive linguistic, literary and cultural past, can certainly play a vital role in offering penetrating inspiration for the literary lovers of other regions of the country to come out with such publications; which would help people across the country to have a glimpse of literary, cultural and other academic pursuits and activities of one another.

My humble advice to the editor is to accommodate folk literary compositions alongside the creative pieces as in the present times, academic focus is abundantly being shifted to popular Literature as it serves the real mirror of any human society.

Dr. Farooq Fayaz
University of Kashmir
Kashmir

. . . .

Dear Prof Borah

So far as I know, this is the only magazine of its kind which is trying to share the entire gamut of the literature of a language with others who do not know that language.

Susmita Bhattacharya
Kolkata

. . . .

Dear Prof. Borah

The magazine is excellently produced and usefully edited. I have not seen any such magazine exclusively meant for an Indian language - in English. We in the south do not know much about Assamese literature and culture as not much of it is available in English translation.

It is good to see that so many good translators are available in your language. I hope you will get consistent support from many more. Congratulations.

Giradhi Govindaraj,
Dharwad, Karnataka

. . . .

Dear Prof. Borah

The endeavour is unique in eastern India and this will create new interest in the literary, cultural and social affairs of the north east. If it survives the onslaught of new consumerism, you will create history.

Satkadi Hota
Bhubaneswar, Orissa

Dear Dr. D.J. Borah

It is a laudable project launched by the North-East Foundation. More than a project, it's a mission! It will definitely make a mark as is clear from its contents.

Kamleshwar,
Suraj Kund Road
New Delhi

. . . .

Dear Dr. Borah

I was delighted to receive the issue of *Yaatra*. Thank you very much. I am sure sending it outside Assam, would enlighten people about Assamese literary scene. I enjoyed the editorial.

Is the magazine only in English?

Would you consider making it bi-lingual or even tri lingual?

Yaatra is a magazine that appears to follow high classical tradition of literature. Congratulation.

Viswamohan Tiwari,
Former Air Vice-Marshal
Noida

. . . .

Dear Prof. Borah

I congratulate on your venture *Yaatra*.

Dr. M Priyobrata Singh
Manipur

Respected Chairman,
N.E. Foundation &
Editor Yaatra

You have taken up the noble mission of introducing your art, culture and writers to rest of the country and world, which is really appreciable. Culture determines our identity and integrity and we should surely be proud of our culture and literature. You seem to be very sensible and conscious about your identity. Your efforts will surely create a social and cultural integration in addition to your basic intention.

Haji Ab. Gani Baig Athar,
Kupwara, Kashmir

. . . .

Dear Dr. D.J. Borah

An innovative approach *Yaatra* has given the much awaited focus towards English translations of eminent poets and writers of Assam. I look forward to more such meaningful participation in the journal's future editions.

Rupanjali Baruah

. . . .

Best wishes, for *'Yaatra'*

Dr. Raosaheb Kasbe
Sangamneer, Maharashtra

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Dear Dr. Borah

It is beautiful journal of Assamese literature. I have enjoyed going through its pages.

My hearty congratulations such a laudable effort.

Dr. Moti Prakash
Gujarat

. . . .

Dear Prof. Borah

We in the Hindi belt know very little about the memorable works done by Assamese scholars, saints, writers etc. though some creative writers like Agrawal who have inspired Assam by their literary work had intimate connections with Rajasthan also. I was Chairman of Rajasthan Sanskrit Academy here. We had tried to trace the impact of Sanskrit on Assamese literature. There are some Sanskrit scholars of Hindi belt working in Assam who speak very high of Assamese culture and literature. The gesture of sending the journal to some readers of other regions of the country is highly laudable.

Devarshi Kala Nath Shasti,
Prithvi Raj Road, Jaipur

. . . .

Respected Prof. D.J. Borah

You are congratulated from the core of heart.

Bhumwar Singh Samaur
Churu, Rajasthan

. . . .

Dear writer Prof. D.J. Borahaji

Your scheme will render literary bridge with all the sister languages of the Indian soil.

Kum. Veerabhadrappa
Ananthapuram
Andhra Pradesh

. . . .

Dear Dr. Borah

India has a vast combination of culture and literature and each has its own characteristics and distinctive feature. We are more interested to read and know what is being written in European literature or American literature rather than what is being practiced in the other states of our own country. After going through *Yaatra* I am convinced that each major language/state in the country should take similar initiatives for their own state.

This sort of effort which ideally should have been from the state Govt. has been taken by you. People of Assam should remain grateful to you. And we, who do not know Assamese, will also remain grateful as get an opportunity to access modern Assamese literature through one window.

Best regards and best wishes

Prabal Kumar Basu,
Kolkota
On e-mail

. . . .

Dear Dr. Borah

It has been wonderful reading the inaugural issue of *Yaatra*. I think the advent of a serious journal like this has been very timely. The effort you have put in to bring has certainly been made manifest, both in terms of content and in quality.

Maan Barua
Kaziranga
On e-mail

. . . .

Respected Prof. Borah

Thanking for sending *Yaatra*, I am very excited about it.

With regards,

Zahirul Hasan
Kolkata
On e-mail

. . . .

Dear Professor Borah

I have duly received the beautiful journal *'Yaatra'* and thank you for the same. I wish to suggest that the name of the journal *'Yaatra'* should be shown on each and every page along with page number.

R.S. Bhaskar,
Member, Advisory
Board (Konkani),
Sahitya Akademi, Kochi
On e-mail

. . . .

Respected Prof. Borah

I think the first issue has come out quite well, I have noticed that quite a few Assamese stories and poems, translated into English, have been included in the volume. I would like to ask you if yu would publish in the journal stories written originally in English by Assamese people, and reflecting Assamese society and culture.

Anuradha Rajkumari Choudhury
New Delhi
On e-mail

. . . .

Dear Prof. Borah

It was the best New Year gift. I find it highly informative and educative.

K.S. Duggal
New Delhi
On e-mail

. . . .

Dear Professor Borah

Thank you very much for sending me the inaugural issue of *Yaatra* which I read with pleasure and enjoyment. I was particularly happy to know about the felicitation to Professor Amalendu Guha and read with interest the review of the volume dedicated to him. We used to know Professor Guha and Mrs Guha well at one time but have not been in touch in recent years. I will be grateful if you will convey my warm greetings to them and help to re-establish contact.

I look forward to subsequent issues of Yaatra.

Meenakshi Mukherjee
Hyderabad
On e-mail

. . . .

Sir

Congratulating you on your grand endeavour in starting *Yaatra*.

It was a nice experience

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to be at the inaugural ceremony of your magazine *Yaatra* in the Sahitya Academi. I am a frequenter of the library there and suddenly happened to drop in. The magazine is well above the standard to call itself a mere national magazine.

Syeda Zahan
New Delhi
On e-mail

Dear Prof. D.J. Borah

Congratulation on the inaugural issue of *'Yaatra'*. I have enjoyed reading it over the weekend.

Jaya Bhattacharji
New Delhi
On e-mail

Dear Dr. (Prof) D.J. Borah

The issue looked well-produced and many important scholars are featured in the issue.

Dr. Bhaskar Roy Barman
Agartala
On e-mail

Dear Dr. Borah

The very idea of bringing out such journal of our Indian languages in English is a need of our time. When I was president of Gujarat state Sahitya Academy, we had an idea of bringing out such journal with translations of Gujarati writings old and new, but owing to the lack of good translators we could not put our idea in practice.

You have done a very good job. *Yaatra* is praiseworthy for its contents as well as layout. Please accept my hearty congratulations.

Please allow me to say that I have translated Asomiya poems, short stories into Gujarati. An anthology containing select poems of late Nirmal Prabhaji, Sri Nilmoni Phookan, Shri Hiren Bhattacharyya is a bilingual one (Asomiya into Gujarati script and facing it the translation). I have translated 'Iyaruingam' into Gujarati from Asomiya with the help of my Asomiya friend Dr. Sunil Kumar Dutta (Culture Deptt) of Tezpur University. Late poet Umashanker Joshi has published (in his translation publication services) *'Samakalin Asomiya Kabita'* (about 50 Asomiya poems translated by me into Gujarati.

Bholabhai Patel
Ahmedabad, Gujrat

Respected Prof. D.J. Borah

I wish a great success for Yaatra and congratulate you all on such a marvellous start of this project.

Though *Yaatra* is a journal of Assamese literature and culture I feel that if 2 or 3 pages could be spared for other northern languages it can strengthen this built bridge of friendship and understanding between people, places, languages culture and generations.

With warm regards

Shashi Pathania
Univesity of Jammu
On e-mail

COMMENTS

DECCAN HERALD,
January 22, 2006

While Indian writing in English in recent years has gone to gain international name and fame, writers who have chosen to express themselves in their mother tongues in different corners of India have not been fortunate enough despite giving their readers a huge number of masterprises.

The culprit has always been the lack of proper translation of the incredibly rich regional literature. And even when translated works are published, like those from organisations like Bharatiya Jnanpith and Sahitya Akademi, often they fail to reach the masses adequately because of non-aggressive marketing. Private publishers, of course, also do come up with the odd translated work, but they are merely a sampler of the great treasure trove of literature that we have.

Compared to Bengali, Tamil or Malayalam literature, the writings literature, the writings from the North-East, and particularly Assam, are a major victim of this lack of translation, and the great tradition of Assamese literature is virtually unknown to those outside the region. In the backdrop of this scenario, a non-governmental organisation called the North-East Foundation, has launched *Yaatra*, an English language journal that will solely concentrate on bringing before the readers translations of both contemporary and clasic Assamese literary work.

THE TELEGRAPH,
December 9, 2005

New Delhi, Dec. 8: Assam has come a long way in literature and culture. Today, the state embarked on a journey to acquaint the nation and the world with these treasures.

Yaatra, a bi-monthly English journal, was lunched by Assamese literatures at the Sahitya Akademi auditorium here.

Only a few samples of the comments from the readers have been published here.

The extensive comments and editorials that appeared in the Assamese vernacular press could not be accommodated this issue.

-Editor

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birth of a dream

Inauguration of *Yaatrā* : Sahitya Akademi Auditorium
Radindra Bhavan, New Delhi
8 December 2005

A dream slowly unfolded before a glittering gathering at the Sahitya Akademi auditorium, New Delhi, on 8 December 2005.

The first issue of ***Yaatra*** was inaugurated on that day.

Delhi on that December day was unusually warm, instead of the usual chill, brought in by the winds from the northern mountains, the evening was quite balmy, making it possible to wear silks, beautiful shawls, light woolens instead of heavy wraps or shapeless padded jackets. The steaming hot tea and sumptous buffet laid out by the Sahitya Akademi to welcome the guests helped create the right environment full of contentment and eager expectation.

And the guests started arriving. Soon the initial trickle turned into a torrent and the small auditorium of Sahitya Akademi overflowed with people lining up along the walls. Many stayed back in the comfy environs of the lobby and warmed with food and tea heard the proceeding of the meeting from there rather than jostling inside the hall for space.

Apart from the guests invited to officiate at the inaugural function which included 'Jnanpeeth' awardee Dr. Indira (Mamoni Roisom) Goswami; Chief Minister of Assam Sri Tarun Gogoi, historian, scholer and poet Dr. Amalendu Guha and Secretary of Sahitya Akademi Dr. K. Satchidanandan, the inaugurator, many other intellectuals, writers, poets, artists, editors and publishers of Delhi with a fair sprinkling of senior bureaucrats, students and members of Assam Association graced the occasion.

Charting the course of the dream that took shape eight years ago with the launch of the foundation as a charitable trust that was formed by the accumulated royalty of a writer, Sharodi, the eminent Sattriya dancer and member of Sangeet Natak Akademi who compered the function, likened the ***journey to the launch of Yaatra with that of a true mission.***

Extending a formal welcome to the guests, Dr. D.J. Borah, Chairman of the North East Foundation and editor of ***Yaatra*** recounted the reason why the foundation embarked on the journey of launching Yaatra as such.

'Over the years, Assamese literature has developed considerably and now it has emerged as a full-fledged literature with powerful novels, exquisite short stories, greatly evolved poetry, non fiction and all other aspects that go to make a vibrant and modern literature. It has drawn its sustenance from the great literary traditions that have evolved with the Bhakti movement of Sankaradeva, his predecessors and successors, from the traditions of Buranji writing under the aegis of Ahom Kings, from the varied and rich tradition of folklore, folk tradition, oral histories of the various myriad group of people that go to make up the people of Assam. It has borrowed freely from Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetain, Tai and various other languages and cultures of India. Its great and varied sources

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Dignitaries on the dais : Editor Dr. D.J. Borah, Chief Guest Dr. Indira (Mamoni Raisom) Goswami, Chief Minister Sri Tarun Gogoi, Secretary Sahitya Akademi Prof. K. Satchidanandan



Manoj Goswami felicitating Dr. Indira Goswami, Trustee, North East Foundation



Chief Minister of Assam Tarun Gogoi being felicitated



Felicitation of Dr. K. Satchidanandan by Sudarshan



Chief Minister felicitated by Secretary Sahitya Akademi Prof. K.Satchidanandan



Prof Amalendu Guha felicitated by Aahlad Mahendra



Dr. B.K. Roy Burman felicitated by Dr. D.J. Borah

and resources are its greatest strength giving Assamese literature a rare vigour, vitality and freshness – brought over the years by the various streams of people who have come with their own cultural treasures and their world views and have incorporated them in the 'Assamese' constantly. This is one of the reason why Assamese people and Assamese literature could bounce back from near extinction in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century that was caused by a string of revolts, invasions, pestilence, destruction of people and habitats, colonial interventions, so on and so forth. It has gathered strength form various peoples' struggles and linguistic movements and most importantly from the process of inclusion of different people into its bosom freely. This

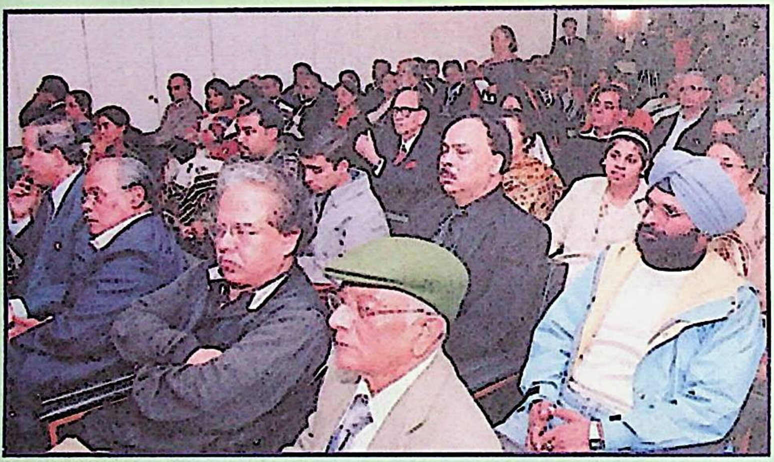
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process was helped by the creation of linguistic states in the post independent era – a process which formed the bedrock of national unity, which has given the feeling to all of us, people of and languages, smaller languages, that sense of belonging to the great Indian people.'

Dr. Borah then went on to say that, 'It's our firm belief that in range, beauty, variety and complexity Assamese literature is at par with the best in India. And it is this conviction that has led us to embark on this journey of publishing ***Yaatra***, the journal of Assamese literature and culture.'

Declaring that 'today' would be a significant day in the cultural history of Assam', Professor Amalendu Guha, the noted historian, scholar and poet, said, 'It is dreams that take shape and bring change to the society. The last century has been a century of ethos, street fights and various kinds of social disturbances. People are fed up with those. It is felt that deeper thinking is necessary to find a road map to peace and progress. The solution to the myriad, problems, facing Assam and the North East must lie in a serious intellectual search.



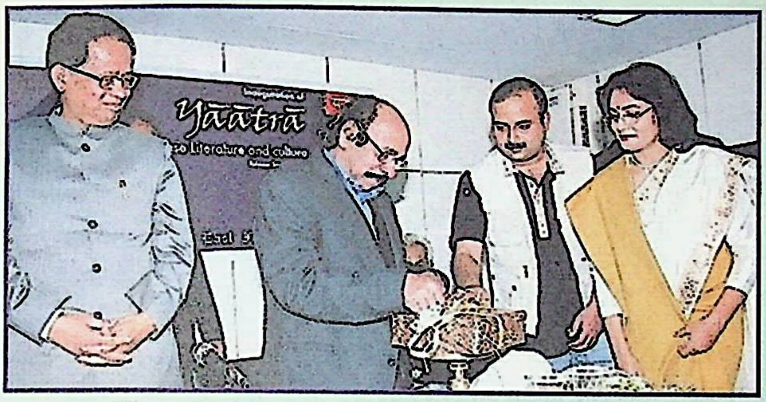




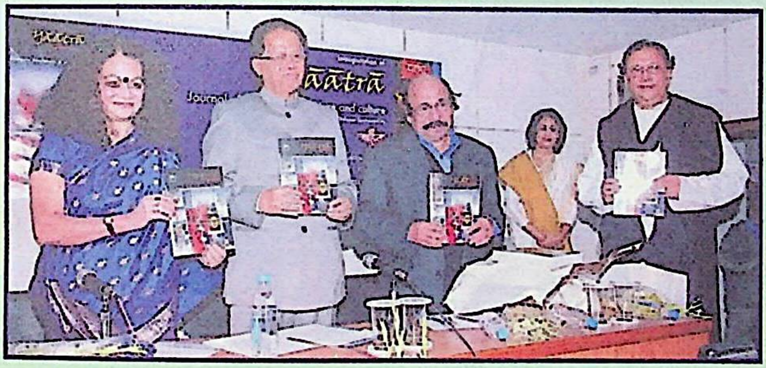
The distinguished audience

Recounting the sense of neglect in the minds of the people of Assam, the feelings that resources are taken out without requisite returns, the historian in Dr. Guha, cautioned that this privation and sense of neglect and wrong has changed the mindset of the people of the region. He also pointed out that the failure of the Bourgeoise state in addressing these problems have led to the emergence of insurgency and violence. Affirming that there are no military solutions to the problem, Dr. Guha said, that only an intellectual revolution shall be able to find out ways of peace in the region. Giving his blessing to the project, Prof. Guha hoped that this project would usher in a renaissance in the state in the intellectual field.

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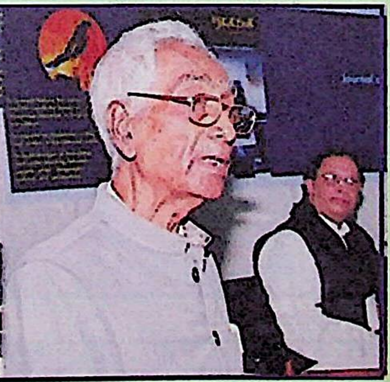
Yaatra about to be released by Prof. K. Satchidanandan, Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi looks on



The moment of release, Dr. Indira Goswami, Sri Tarun Gogoi, Prof. K. Satchidanandan and the editor. Mrs Sharodi Saikia, the compere, looks on from behind.



An impassioned plea for literature – Dr. Indira (Mamoni Raisom) Goswami delivering her speech.



Prof. Amalendu Guha

Called upon by Dr. Indira (Mamoni Roisom) Goswami, Prof. K. Satchidanandan, the eminent poet, critic and the Secretary of Sahitya Akademi then formally inaugurated the journal saying that Yaatra answers a major demand of lovers of Indian literature today – to access the literature of the regions other than their own through a common linguistic medium (The total text of Prof. K. Satchidanandan's speech is published separately in this issue). Calling the effort of Yaatra timely, relevant and welcome, Prof. Satchidanandan said that the inaugural issue successfully represented the aspirations of Assamese literature today. He wished the effort a long and fruitful life.

The guest of honour, Sri Tarun Gogoi, Chief Minister of Assam, in his speech said, 'I am really very happy on this occasion, though I am the only politician in midst of literary people and I am not a literary person, I am happy to be here. Sri Gogoi went on to say that literature can play a great role in society. He lauded the role played by Jnanpeeth award winning writer Indira Goswami in trying to bring peace to the state through her efforts to bring ULFA to the negotiating table and promised to extend all help to the process. Congratulating Dr. Borah and his team on bringing out *Yaatra*, he hoped that it will really build bridges between Assam and the rest of the country.

Prof. B.K. Roy Burman, the world-renowned anthropologist and social scientist, hoped that efforts like *Yaatra* would be able to bring better understanding amongst different ethnic groups of the North East and this will be able to make such things and ethnic clashes a thing of the past. Saying today's world is a boarderless community, Prof. Roy Burman went on to say that literature now have more responsibility to wipe out sorrow

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through creative endeavour in this new world. Biren Gohain, a noted writer, historical researcher, and a senior official of Assam administration, also spoke on the occasion

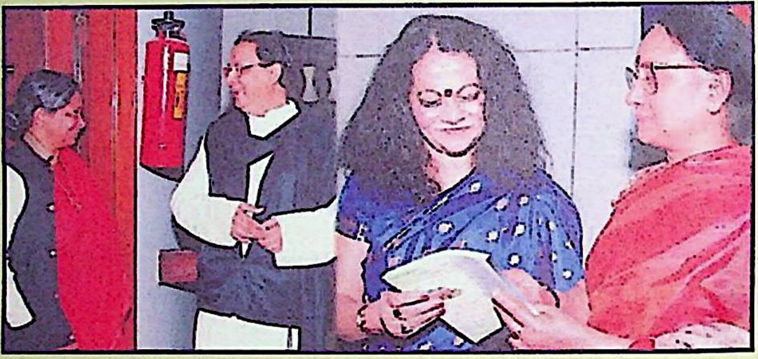
Dr. Indira (Mamoni Roisom) Goswami, the Jnanpeeth award winning author, peacemaker and chairperson of the function, started her speech with a historical note. 'Having remained in the shadow for a long time, Assam's culture assets have also been denied adequate recognition' she said. She declared that the 12th century's chronicle writing tradition of Assam is an achievement few Indian languages can boast of. It is same with the case of fifteenth centuries one act plays (Ankia Nats) composed by the great Vaishnava saint and reformer Srimanta Sankaradeva. 'When Dasartha Ozha and Iswar Chandra Mathur translated these Ankia Nats into Hindi they were greatly surprised. Dasaratha Ozha, who was like my teacher, wrote that when the nuances of traditional Sanskrit drama had nearly been lost from other parts – it had been kept alive in Assam by Sankaradeva.' Dr. Goswami went on to describe these dramas as greatly evolved creations incorporating all the elements of drama, literature and even technical aspects. 'While Sankaradeva used painted scenes in Assamese drama in the 15th century the use of painted scenes in drama started in Europe only on the17th century', said Dr. Goswami.

Recounting the worst period of



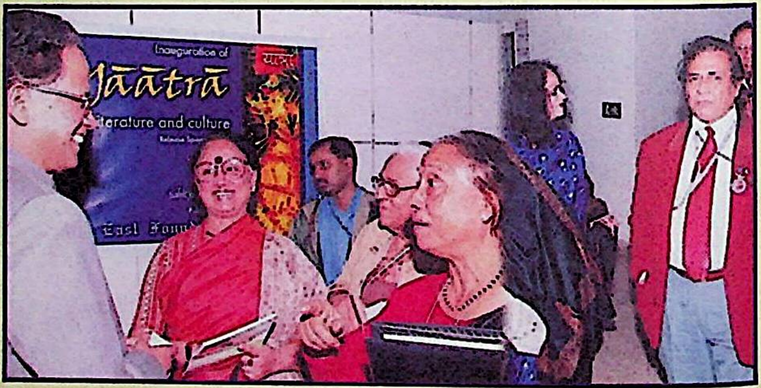
Address by editor Dr. D.J. Borah

Manoj Kumar Goswami Trustee, North East Foundation, Proposing the formal vote of thanks



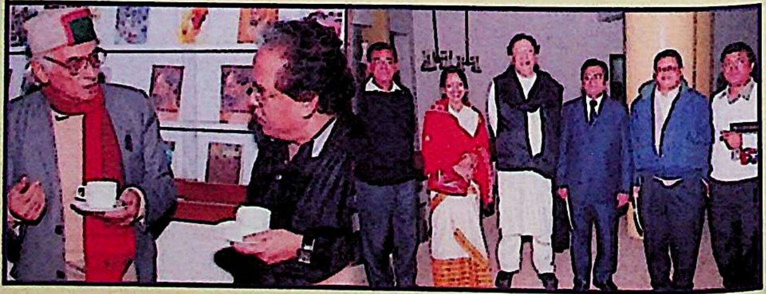
Geeta Dharmarajan of Katha

Dr. Indira Goswami & Chitra Mudgal



A light of moment

The press in full attendance



A point of debate Prof. B.K. Roy Burman with Sanjeev Barua

A section of appreciative literati with editor, Yaatra

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the Assamese language when it was removed from school and colleges by the British she went on to recall the glorious part played by many in its rightful restoration. Even in that dark era, some very famous books were written in Assamese. Such as the autobiography of Harakanta Barua Sudaramin, which is a real rarity. She described it as a true mirror of the times, which reflected the society from various angles and describing all sections of people who played a role in it.

Warming up to the theme of Ramayana in Assamese, a subject very close to her heart, Professor Goswami said that Ramayana was translated. To Assamese in the 14th century by the poet Madhava Kandali and it was the first Ramayana writen in one of the modern Indo Aryan languages. This literary masterpiece incorporates some great innovations which have given it a very distinct flavour, Dr. Goswami said. This Ramayana was patronised by a great tribal king Mahamanikya of Assam and it was under his patronage that Madhava Kandali could write this Ramayana in Assamese in peace unlike Tulsidas, who had to flee from one place to another as the conservative castes did not allow him to write Ramayana in peoples language, Dr. Goswami added.

Tulsidas himself was translated into Assamese in the 18th century! Calling this as something quite novel, Dr. Goswami wondered whether such early translation of Tulsidas was there in other Indian languages.

Thus recounting the long and fruitful tradition of translation in Assamese literary history in her brilliant speech, Dr. Goswami hoped that the present journal *Yaatra* would also reflect the literature of the present bleeding times of Assam – a state ravaged by insurgency and violence, a state where more than ten thousand young men which included doctors, writers, poets, have lost their lives due to violence. Recounting her experience of meeting more then three hundred families who have lost someone in the violence, Dr. Goswami said that the desire for peace in never so strong, so all pervasive, as it is in the present day Assam. She said that she has been trying to bring peace to this trouble torn state – a sure references to her efforts to bring the underground insurgents to the negotiating table, she wished that Government will help her in this endeaviour. No country would prosper unless there is peace, she declared.

Describing *Yaatra* as 'a dream child of ours' Dr. Goswami congratulated the editor Dr. D.J. Borah for undertaking this endeavour and hoped that people outside the state would be able to know about the state, about Assamese society and literature through this journal.

Offering a formal vote of thanks, Manoj Kumar Goswami, Trustee of the North East Foundation, editor of the prestigious Assamese daily 'Janasadharan' and himself a very powerful fiction writer in Assamese, thanked of the invited guests, the audience, the press, the media and everybody associated with the project. He specially thanked Sahitya Akademi on behalf of the North East Foundation, specially Prof. K. Satchidanandanji, Secretary Sahitya Akademi, for not only consenting to inaugurate the journal Yaatra, but also for extending the help and patronage of Sahitya Akademi for this whole project.

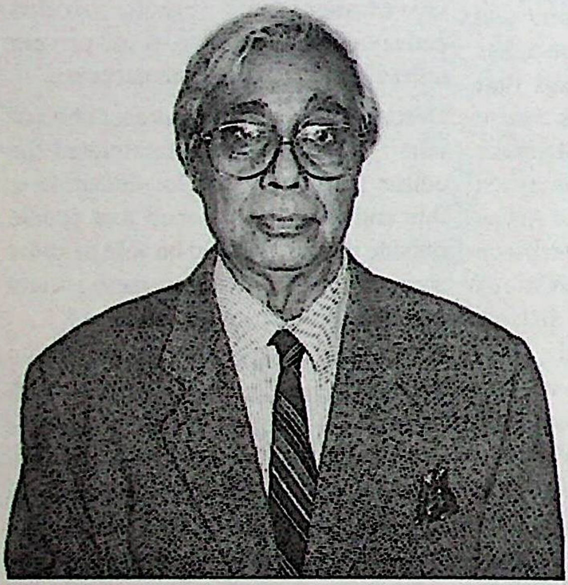
Thus a glittering evening enlivened by a great number of writers, poets, authors, politicians, officials and media persons, came to a formal end at the conclusion of a tightly scheduled meeting.

Yaatra was formally launched
Its journey has began.......

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honours for dual contribution: assam valley award to Arun Sarma

One of the most prestigious literary award, the Assam Valley Literary Award, instituted by the Williamson Magor Education Trust, was awarded in 2005 to Sri Arun Sarma in recognition of his life time achievements. Sarma, one of the most versatile dramatists of Assam who had been instrumental in shaping modern Assamese drama, is equally at home in the medium of creative writing and is a significant novelist of the present times. He has the rare distinction of having won the Sangeet Natak Akademi award for his contributions to drama and the Sahitya Akademi Award for literature. He has also been honoured with the presidentship of Asom Natya Sanmilan – the apex dramatist body of the state. His novels are also very sensitive and of the classical mould, wide in their scope, rich and varied in their characterisation and drama. A harbinger of modernity in Assamese drama, he is one of those rare writers who observe the world with a clinical detachment but with sensitive concern.



the first sahitya akademi award for the bodo language of assam



It is the first time that the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award is instituted in the Bodo language of Assam and the first recipient is the eminent Bodo writer, poet, dramatist, critic and literary organiser Shri Mangalsingh Hazowary (b. 1954). Hazowary, a versatile writer who has to his credit four full-length dramas, four collections of poetry, a biography (on Padmasri Madaram Brahma), two short story collections, three collections of critical articles on society and literature. Besides these, he has compiled and edited 13 books including text books for the primary section in Bodo and a collection of Bodo prose and short stories for the degree course in Bodo under Gauhati University. A highly honoured writer, Hazowary has been conferred with numerous awards and honours by different quarters of the state and the country. Hazowary has also been in the forefront of research, revival and repopularisation of traditional Bodo religious and cultural practices centred on 'Bathou' religion and he has extensively written on these. His efforts have created a cultural mooring and also a sense of roots of and belonging to the Bodo people in the present turbulent times. The Sahitya Akademi Award for Hazowary signifies, at the same time, the marvellous journey of revival, development, standardisation and elevation of Bodo, an ancient language of Assam, to the honoured panetheon of Indian languages, and also marks the personal saga of a tireless writer who is both a leader and a toiler in this epic linguistic journey of the Bodos.

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photographic portrayal of ethnic living: the unique character of Yashe Dorjee Thongchi's writings



A surprise winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award, 2005, in Assamese is Sri Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi an Arunachali writer, possibly the last of the rare breed who write in Assamese. At one time the medium of instruction in Arunachal Pradesh (then NEFA – North East Frontier Agency) was Assamese till the Central Government imposed Hindi. And Thongchi is possibly a legacy of that past which envokes great nostalgia in the minds of many people of Assam of a world that's lost forever to the Assamese.

Yashe Dorjee Thongchi belongs to the Serdukpen tribe of westernmost Kameng area of Arunachal, an area historically influenced by Tibetan Buddhism. His two collections of short stories and four novels portray the insular tribal world of the snowclad mountains and mysterious, mist-covered valleys of Arunachal. It is a world in the throes of change forced by alien influences, at times brought by the practices (democracy, elections) and institutions (political parties!) of a modern state. Thongchi captured all these in a quaint, touching, simple way, at times with vividness like a photographer. The human drama of these areas, occasionally the result of the clash of archaic customs like polyandry with modern sensibilities are described in his writings and they bring to the readers a taste of novelty and an attraction of the unknown.

Keshab Mahanta: the songmaker and poet of the people is no more



He was self-proclaimed man of the masses who became the darling of the middle class too for his hauntingly melodious songs and elevating poetry. He is the last great cultural and literary figure that was born out of the progressive currents and undercurrents of the freedom movement. Born in 1926, in a tea garden on the North bank of Brahmaputra, Keshab Mahanta had known poverty, privation and neglect and at times vicious opposition for his ideology, political beliefs and doings. He jumped headlong into the freedom struggle while he was still a high school student. Devoting him fully in the organizational work amongst youths and students, helping the senior freedom fighters, the underground revolutionaries of '42, he refused to sit for his school final exams in a country that was under the yoke of foreigners. He was imprisoned for his role by the British. The fiery idealism of the youth inexorably took him towards the revolutionary, socialist and communist ideologies. Travelling through Rayota Sabha (1944), All Indian student federation and then Indian peoples theatre movement (IPTA), Mahanta worked with such political and cultural luminaries and revolutionaries like Jyotiprasad Agarwalla, Bhabananda Dutta and Bishnuprasad Rabha who

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played the leading role in the cultural life of the state. Working in different places as a school teacher, college teacher, university official devoted to publication at Gauhati University, he also did a stint as editor of *Soviet Desh*, Assamese version of now defunct *Soviet Land* magazine published by the USSR. He was all along associated with the progressive literary trend and was closely involved in the publication of progressive periodicals such as *Jayanti, Milon, Luit, Natan Sahitya*, etc.

His songs, poetry and writings depict, with a rare sensitivity and vividness, at times with touching tenderness, the hopes and aspirations of the common people, of the peasantry of Assam. Most of the time his songs, sung by almost all the artists of the state, establish a direct rapport with the listeners. And the songs, transcending the imaginary boarder between song and poetry merge with one another and become an indivisible whole, a feat very few writers are able to achieve. A much honoured artist, he was awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award (1999) for his collection *Moro je kiman hepah* (so many longings of mine). His sudden demise on 31 March 2006 brought out a genuine outpouring of great grief in the state. His absence will create a void which none except the slowly fading melody of his own poetry can fill up for a long long time.

sahityacharyya Jatindra Nath Goswami passes away : a void difficult to fill



He was a man passionately given to the task of developing and protecting Assamese language and literature. One of the stalwarts of the linguistic movement to establish Assamese as a modern state language, the medium of instruction and of rejuvenating Asom Sahitya Sabha, the premier national literary organisation of Assam, and so on, Jatindra Nath Goswami died in Jorhat just 5 days short of his 88th birthday on 7 November 2005. A prolific writer and an editor of repute, who compiled and edited the collected works of some of the greats in Assamese literature, he was also a very efficient literary organiser. Former president of Asom Sahitya Sabha, he was conferred with the title 'Sahityacharyya' by the Sabha in 1997. A man of principle and discipline, he lived a life with spartan simplicity devoted to his first love – Assamese language and literature. It is really very difficult to fill the void created in the social and intelectual life of a state created by the passing away of such personalities.

passing away of a popular dramatist: Mahendra Barthakur 1934-2005



A dramatist who used the medium of drama as an instrument to expose and criticize the society afflicted with malice with scathing wit and humour, Mahendra Barthakur, a doyen of Assamese theatre, breathed his last on 9 December 2005 at the age of 71. He was a man instrumental in popularising drama and specially radio plays, and was with AIR from 1967 till his retirement at 1993. He produced 57 successful radio plays, more than 50 plays for versatile mobile theatres of the state and some very good plays for the general stage, besides writing the screenplay for a dozen of very popular Assamese feature films. He was honoured with the presidentship of Asom Natya Sanmilan besides scores of other awards for his creativity. Always encouraging to the young and upcoming dramatists and writers, he was also a very sensitive writer who has to his credit two good collections of short stories and seven novels. Mahendra Barthakur deserves a dignified and very unique place in the cultural firmament of the state.

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Dr. Ramcharan Thakuria
death of a distinguished scholar

Birth in the rural backwaters, lack of facilities, grinding poverty – nothing could hold back this indomitable and brilliant man from becoming a teacher of Assamese which he always wanted to. Dr. Ramcharan Thakuria's long innings in the Department of Assamese at prestigious Cotton College is marked not only by valuable academic and research activities but also his own development as a fine scholar and writer in Assamese. A good orator and organiser, Dr. Thakuria was the General Secretary of Asom Sahitya Sabha for two sessions and also its Vice-President. He had retired as the Principal of Cotton College before untimely fate snatched him away in December 2005.

achievers in pursuit of dreams

(a) Dreaming a dream of Books – Paresh Malakar



Giving up a lucrative job in India with the largest publisher of children's books in the world, Paresh Malakar came back to Guwahati, his original work place, to independently publish good books both in English and in Assamese to popularize books and develop the reading habit among children. He, as well as his friends associated with **'Anwesha'**, was the pioneer in holding small book fairs with selected books in schools in the small towns and rural areas of the state. It was a venture that soon became a movement really ushering in a book revolution of sorts. The prime mover behind the spring festival of books for children in Guwahati (now in its fifth year), Paresh has really creating a beautiful world with books not only for the children, but also for all book-lovers of the state.



(b) Dreams of the printed word

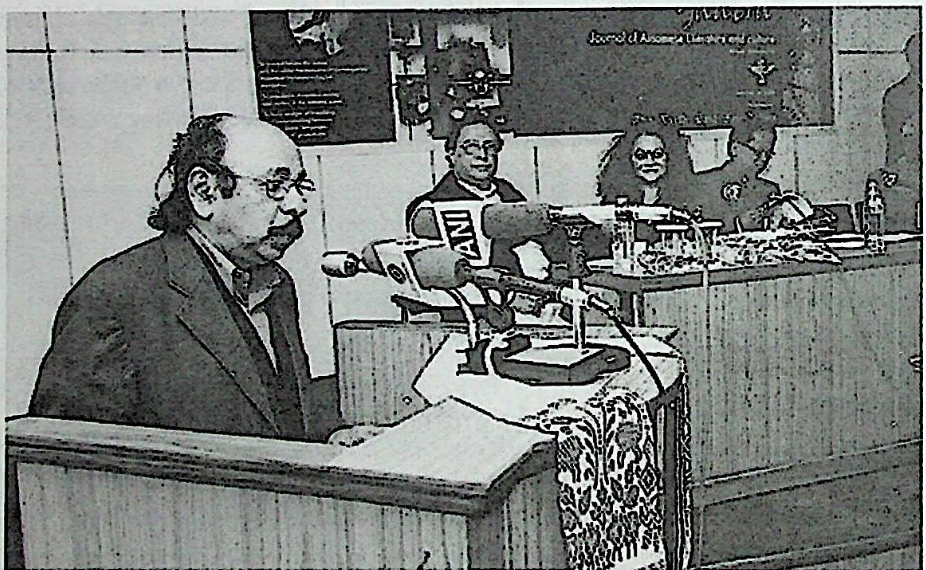
An engineer and a man of industrial project finances, Shoneet Bijoy Das dreamt of publishing! Publishing exclusive literary magazines as well as beautiful books in Assamese. This dream took him from a cushy job in Assam financial corporation to publishing a regular literary anthology titled *Katha,* a really sought-after journal in the literary circles of Assam. In June 2005, Sonit launched the beautiful literary journal *Katha-Guwahati,* which has, in the short span of its existence, gained widespread acceptance among writers and literati of the state. Widely read, Sonit himself is an able editor as well as a good writer.

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'a relevant and welcome step'

Professor K. Satchidanandan
Secretary, Sahitya Akademi

***(The text of Prof. K. Satchidanandan's speech on the occasion of the release of* Yaatra)**



Dr. Smt. Indira Goswami, Jnanpith-award winning Assemse writer; Sri Tarun Gogoi, Hon. Chief Minister of Assam; Professor Amalendu Guha, renowned writer and scholar; lovers of literature,

I am extremely happy to release the inaugural number of *Yaatra* a journal of Assamese literature and culture in English. *Yaatra* answers a major demand of the lovers of Indian literature today, to have access to the literatures of regions other than their own through a common linguistic medium. We have only very few journals of this kind in English, like *Aniketana* a journal of Kannada literature from Karnataka Sahitya Academy and *Malayalam Literary Survey* published by the Kerala Sahitya Academy. *Indian Literature*, the bi-monthly journal of the Sahitya Akademi, and *The Little Magazine* published from Delhi are two important journals that feature Indian literatures in translation; but since they have to handle all the Indian languages, they cannot focus permanently on one literature. *Indian Horizons* brought out by the Indian Council of Cultural Relations, *The India International Centre Quarterly* published by I.I.C. Delhi, *Creative Mind*, a magazine of art, culture and literature from Delhi, *Samyukta*, *Haritham* and *The Word Plus* from Kerala and *The New Quest* from Pune are some other notable

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magazines that regularly publish translations of creative writing from the Indian languages. There are also journals like *Kavyabharati* (Madurai), *Chandrabhaga* (Cuttack) and *Poetry Chain* (Trivandrum) that focus chiefly on poetry. This is besides several academic journals devoted mainly to criticism. Some of the excellent initiatives like *Indian Writing Today* from Pune and *Vagarth* from Delhi have ceased to be, and we no more have popular periodicals like *The Illustrated Weekly of India* that used to feature our language writers in English translation. The scene, while not entirely bleak, does call for more initiatives for a fuller representation of contemporary writing across the languages in India. It is this context that renders a bi-monthly like *Yaatra* featuring contemporary Assamese writings in English translation all the more relevant and welcome.

Assamese literature is one of the richest and oldest literatures of India that can calim about a thousand years of fertile existence, that goes back to the mystic *Charyapadas,* the songs composed by the Buddhist Siddâcharyas of the esoteric *Sahajayana* cult, though the real history of Assamese literature begins from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that saw several translations and adaptations of Indian epics ably executed in the *Kavya* form by poets like Harivara Vipra, Hema Saraswathi; Rudra Kandali and Kaviratna Saraswati and *pachali Kavya* poets like Durgavara, Mankar and Pitambara Kavi. With Shankardeva, the great Vaishnavite poet of *Bhagavata-purana*, Madhava Kandali, the poet of the Assamese *Ramayana,* and their contemporaries and successors like Ananta-Kandali and Govinda Misra, Assamese literature truly came of age and began to develop its distinct formal identity with unique forms like *ankiya-natas, badh-kavyas, bargitas*, etc. With the *Chairtras*, *Charita-puthis* and the later *buranji* chronicles of Ahom kings and nobles prose too began to develop. The learning of English and Bengali that began with the British occupation of Assam in 1826 initially caused a set-back to Assamese language and literature, though soon the Christian missionaries with the help of native enthusiasts like Anandram Dhekial Phookan, Hemachandra Barua and Gunabhiram Barua, pioneered a revival, whose best products like Lakshminath Bezbarua, Rajanikanta Bardoloi, Hemachandra Goswami, Chandrakumar Agarwalla, Padmanath Gohain Barua. Benudhar Rajkonda and Kamala Kanta Bhattacharya followed in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Romantic poetry, social satire and new forms like the novel and the sonnet made Assamese writing really contemporary. Another group of writers from Hiteswar Barbarua, Raghunath Chaudhary and Ambikagiri Roychoudhury to Chandradhar Barua, Durgeshwar and Mitradeva Mahanta carried this literary revolution forward by contributing lyric poetry, narrative *kavyas*, as well as mythological and historical plays, thus developing both the personal and social dimensions of literature. Then came the period of national regeneration giving rise to a national consciousness and introducing new linguistic strategies and literary devices. The plays of Atulchandra Hazarika, Jyotiprasad Agarwalla and others alongwith the poems of Devakanta Barua, Dimbeswar Neog, Ganeshchandra Neog and others modernized Assamese literature and theatre during the pre-Independence decades.

With the coming of independence, there was a new flowering of all genres : The spread of free verse, the maturing of the novel, short story, essay and literary criticism, and the introduction of surrealism, symbolism, imagism and other new modes of poetic articulation liberated Assamese literature from status-quoist liter-

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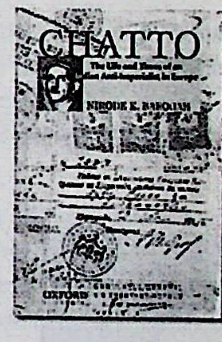
ary notions. While it is impossible to mention the scores of names of writers who have contributed to this great innovation, one cannot forget names like Navakant Barua, Nilmani Phookan, Hiren Bhattacharya, Nirmalprabha Bardoloi, Ajit Barua and others in poetry; Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, Syed Abdul Malik, Indira Goswami, Silabhadra, Lakshminandan Bora, Mahim Bora, Saurabh Chaliha, Nirupama Borgohain, Nagen Saikia, Chandraprasad Saikia, and others in fiction; Prabin Phukan, Satyaprasad Barua, Anil Choudhury, Girish Chaudhuri, Basanta Saikia, Arun Sarma, Ali Haider, Prafulla Bora and others in drama and Maheshwar Neog. Hiren Gohain, Bhaben Barua and others in literary criticism. At present there is a whole new generation of writers that is maturing fast and shows great diversity of style and approach many of whom - from Samir Tanti, Sananta Tanti, Nilim Kumar, Saurav Saikia and Anubhav Tulsi to Jiban Narah, Sohrab Hosain, Anupama Basumatary, Anupam Kumar, Salima Begum, Mousumi Kandali and others have already made their mark on the current literary scene. Their work shows features similar to that of their coevals in other major Indian languages. They are striving to come out of the solipsistic tendencies of early modernism with its alienation and disillusionment and to look at real life in the face, a change spurred on chiefly by the turbulence of the recent years that has left no ivory tower unshaken. The life of the marginalized, oral history, the tragedy of insurgency, popular beliefs and practices, tribal life : these seem to be some of the major thematic concerns in contemporary fiction. There is a clear return to real life lived by the common people in Assam and its neighbourhood. This has also meant a retrieval of popular speech, of dialects of different communities and regions, with their native rhythms, tones and specific usages. This, again, has been happening recently in many languages like Bengali, Telugu, Kannada, Tamil, Malayalam, Marathi, Gujarati and Hindi, where the sophistry of the standardized language and its hegemony are being countered by the plurality and simplicity of the natural speech of diverse communities. The emergence of tribal and minority writing is another radical phenomenon that Assam shares with several other regions of India today. This is also true of immigrant writing and women's writing, both of which are contributing to a greater democratization of our literatures.

The inaugural issue of ***Yaatra***, I am happy to say, honestly reflects these avant-garde aspirations of Assamese literature today, while also recognizing the diverse streams of contemporary writing. It carries serious book reviews, survey articles, an insightful critique by Hiren Gohain of W.L. Smith's writings on Sankardeva, poems and short stories especially by the young and upcoming writers in readable translations, political comments and a discussion on Sattriya dance, besides literary news. The whole issue has been carefully planned and is apt to give a general idea about the current scenario of Assamese literature. I am certain it will further improve in future, with in-depth interviews with major living writers, translations of short novels and plays and critical articles on texts and authors. Journals like ***Arunodoi, Jonaki,*** and ***Bijuli*** had played a major role in the literary awakenings in Assam, and I dare hope that ***Yaatra*** will play an equally important role in projecting the best of Assamese literature on the national, if not international, literary scene and building bridges between Assamese and other literatures of India. I wish the journal a long and fruitful life. ❑

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M. S. Prabhakara

Nirode K Barooah pens a splendid history of 'forgotten people'



Chatto
The life and times of an Indian Anti-Imperialist in Europe
Published by Oxford University Press, Delhi 2004
Price : Rs. 645.00

Subhas Chandra Bose is not the only 'forgotten hero' of the Indian freedom struggle — a description and the title of a recent film that is currently in the news. He has had many other companions, predecessors and successors, some of whom have been even 'more forgotten' than Bose. History has its own way of forgetting losers, for almost always it is the winners who write history.

The life of Virendranath Chattaopadhyaya (born in Hyderabad, 31 October 1880; died in the latter part of 1937, probably executed by firing squad in Moscow on 2 September 1937), popularly known as Chatto, is an object lesson in the vagaries and cruelties of history proving, if ever proof were needed, this truism. Yes, he was a flawed character, but can one say even of the noblest and most admired of historical personages that they were without any flaws?

Born into a distinguished Bengali family domiciled in Hyderabad as the eldest son and second of the eight children (Sarojini Naidoo, the poet, was his elder sister) of Dr Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya and his wife Varada Sundari Devi, Chatto's early life followed an almost set pattern. Like many of his generation and class, he went to England to sit for the Indian Civil Service examination. Like many others before and after him he too failed to get through, not once, but twice. Again, like so many others facing the same predicament, he qualified as a barrister. Soon after his arrival in London he met an English girl with whom he started living together — the first of the many liaisons and relationships he had with European and American women, to some of whom he was married, one of the marriages, a so-called common law marriage, being to the well known American communist, Agnes Smedley — another of history's forgotten people except by scholars searching for a sufficiently un-researched subject to work on their doctoral dissertations — now being appropriated by feminist scholarship.

Chatto has been, even if only posthumously, rather more fortunate. Instead of becoming the object of untrained research scholars desperately seeking a subject, any subject, to hang a thesis on, he has found, even if nearly three quarters of a century of his death, a brilliant and most meticulous historian to delve into and tell

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the gripping but forgotten details of his life story (*Chatto: The Life and times of an Indian Anti-Imperialist in Europe* by Nirode K. Barooah, OUP, Delhi, 2004). The book, the first full-length biographical study of Chatto, based on original documents in several European languages sourced from archives and libraries across Europe (and in India), is a gripping narrative, a truly historical reconstruction of a life in the broader context of a milieu now almost forgotten. One reads the book forwards and backwards, with delight and surprise at being reminded of a fact long lost in the recesses of one's memory. The book confirms and questions many accepted and unproven facts and assumptions about a vital part of our national history.

Chatto, of course, was not merely an 'anti-imperialist', a definition that would fit most of the politically conscious Indians who lived under British rule; he was also a Communist. However, unlike some of his contemporaries who believed that ideas like nationalism could not co-exist with commitment to communism — and vice versa — for Chatto there was no contradiction between the two. In fact, this commitment and faith, shared by many other Indian revolutionaries who had made a home in Europe in the years between the wars, in particular the so-called Berlin group, probably also led to the tragic denouement of his life when in a series of swift developments, he was arrested on the night of 16-17 July 1937 from his flat in Leningrad, within weeks of being confirmed as a specialist ethnographer at the Institute of Anthropology and Ethnography attached to the USSR Academy of the Sciences, apparently on vague charges of 'political dishonesty'; and after a swift trial before the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR was sentenced to death and executed the same day, 2 September 1937.



Dr. M.S. Prabhakar had taught English literature at Gauhati University before he opted for a career in journalism. Winner of Kannada Sahitya Akademi Award for fiction, Prabhakar has written extensively on societies and cultures of Assam and the North East. His journalist pieces are remarkable for his clinical objectivity and commitment to truth.

Soon thereafter, two other Indian communists in domicile in the Soviet Union, Abani Mukherji and Ghulam Ambia Khan Lohani, both close (and sometimes also quarrelling) comrades of Chatto, were sentenced to death and executed soon thereafter on what is now revealed to have been entirely trumped up charges. The Soviet authorities as well as official historians of the CPI acknowledged the unjustness of these actions.

Barooah's book is a gripping account of an extraordinary political and intellectual journey from Hyderabad to Leningrad where, under the Russified version of his name as Dr Virendranat Agornatovich Chatopadaya, Chatto found intellectual recognition as a scholar of linguistics and ethnography and, in the companionship of Lidiya Eduardovna Karunovskaya that began initially as a remarkable ménage a trios that included her husband, a measure of emotional fulfilment as well. These triumphs against adversity, or if one likes, the illusion of having reached the placid home stretch after a long and perilous journey across stormy seas, were however violently shattered by the grim denouement of his trial and execution.

Indian freedom fighters began to travel to foreign parts to continue the struggle against foreign rule, often illegally and in the most adverse of circumstances, in the very wake of the collapse of 1857 revolt. To that extent, such mobilisation preceded the formation of political parties like the Indian National Congress. Most of these freedom fighters that left India were influenced as much by ideas of

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nationalism as of socialism and communism, sharply contested ideas in Europe. India's struggle for national liberation from colonial bondage necessarily also had to be a class struggle, a struggle for liberation from domestic varieties of oppression deeply rooted in feudalism and revivified by the emergent capitalism. This common thread runs through every narrative of the liberation movement, individual biographies or more general histories. This is so with this narrative as well.

Inevitable personality clashes apart, the differences within the national liberation movement among the émigrés and those inside the country were about both the means and the end, the path one took and the ultimate objective. While closely following the obscure details of Chatto's life and struggle, Barooah's book never misses this larger picture.

The life of an exile, even in the best and most comfortable of circumstances, is harsh and lonely. Shortage of money, breakdown and betrayal of personal relationships, loneliness, absence of reliable news from home, suspicion among comrades encouraged by the British agencies always on the alert about the activities of the exiles, legitimate concerns about security against spies within the movement that sometimes degenerated into paranoia ... one can go on. The title chosen for this essay is from a description of Chatto in a British security file; and Chatto whom the British security agencies very much wanted to assassinate appears as Chandra Lal, "the most dangerous conspirator in or out of India", in a spy story by Somerset Maugham, like so many English novelists a part time spy.

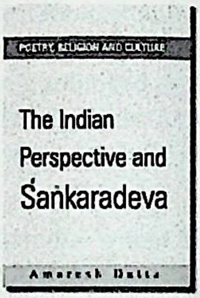
Many succumb; stronger persons like Chatto cultivate other interests. At the time of his death, Chatto was not merely a scholar of social sciences acknowledged by his peers but was hoping to acquire Soviet citizenship. Indian freedom was still the objective; but the path he chose would be his own. It is only in retrospect that one wonders at his failure to see the perils around him in the Soviet Union of the 1930s that affected even the highest in the CPSU leadership. Chatto's position became even more vulnerable following the (then) unresolved mystery of the assassination of Sergy Kirov, the leader from Leningrad, in December 1934. Chatto, as Barooah notes, was Kirov's protégé, to whom he owed at least in part his academic position in Leningrad.

Most of the other characters who people the book are 'forgotten people'. One wishes that some of them would find equally able and meticulous biographers. I have always been fascinated by one person who makes his appearance in every narrative of freedom movement and the founding of the Communist Party of India outside the country. He flits across this narrative as well. Usually referred to as P. B. Acharya or M. P. B. Acharya (in this book as M. P. T. Acharya), his full name was Mandyam Prativadi Bhayankara Thirumalacharya — the last name often split into its component parts. The name is not merely a mouthful; it encapsulates a history and a culture and a discipline as well — one well versed in logic and disputation who can strike terror in the hearts of his disputants. A uniquely apposite name for a communist revolutionary who after all is constantly engaged in ideological disputations. ❑

[The article appeared first in The Sentinel (Guwahati) of 29 May 2005]

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poetry of scholarship - a look into Sankaradeva's role



Poetry, Religion and Culture,
The Indian Perspective and Sankaradeva- by Amaresh Dutta
(Professor Maheswar Neog Commemoration Lecture)
Forum for Sankaradeva Studies
Guwahati : Assam : 2004. Price Rs. 150/- ($50)

Is poetry always the celebration of life?

Indian poetry is – so thinks Professor Amaresh Dutta who had delivered the 7th Maheswar Neog Commemorative Lecture titled aptly 'Poetry, religion and culture' : The Indian perspective and 'Sankaradeva' which has been published by Forum for Sankaradeva Studies, Guwahati, recently.

'This celebration – an Indian poetry is mainly celebratory in character– is not only the celebration of the fun and joy of living but also of man's heroic struggle against the impersonal forces of destiny as well as man's hunger for peace that passes understanding.'

The celebratory nature of Indian poetry is also present in Saint Sankardeva's devotional poetry which has over the years not only built the bedrock of Assamese culture, but has shaped Assamese psyche and sensibility. The author observes the close and intricate relationship that poetry and religion have – specially during the evolutionary years of each religion and religio-cultural ambit.

'Poetry and religion are not only mutually inclusive, they also constantly draw on each other's resources. Lives and works of saints have inspired literary efforts of various kinds and provided themes for many artistic endeavours in painting, music and sculpture... And men of true religion also often found it necessary or even compelling to have recourse to poetry to give expression to their deepest feelings of God- consciousness.'

The author explored this theme further as –

'Poetry by providing the aesthetic understanding of the various ramifications of life, religion by laying the moral ground and guiding our spiritual longing for what Pascal called 'certitude' in midst of baffling uncertainties and culture by showcasing the innumerable ways of celebrating the one single human desire for meaningful existence on this earth alone can perhaps explore the possibilities of a multi- phonically harmonious world. But as Shakespeare saw it :

'Such harmony is in immortal souls;

But whilst the muddy venture of decay

Both grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.'

It is also perhaps relevant to ask if change and continuity form the basic principle that guides these activities or whether their form and content are shaped only be geography or by an essential oneness of purpose.'

This lecture which makes the book was delivered in 2002 end by Prof Amaresh Dutta as the 7th Maheswar Neog Commemoration Lecture held annually in honour of Prof Neog, a scholar extraordinary and an acknowledged authority on Sankaradeva and Vaishnavism in Assam.

It is possibly not the 'done thing' to give long quotes in reviews, however the quotes possibly helps us to understand the structure and tenor of Dutta's lecture (and the book). And such a liberal outlook has at times been a constraint which made the author not to look at some core issues critically but instead had diluted these in his own 'celebration'. Therefore he could take a very liberal, simplistic and at times a

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watered down view of the evolution of such 'Indian' institutions as the caste system and its relation to the religiously ordained Hindu society. Sri Dutta went on to say that if the Aryans were migrants they had carried in with them some awareness of the core problems of human life, or they have learned it from their native experience (if they have natives!) and have been able to evolve a social system where the victor and the vanquished (the non Aryans, the aboriginals etc.) could be accommodated in the four tiers of the caste system (and also outside it as outcastes) in great social harmony. Such idealistic construct of the caste system (so akin to the pet theories of RSS walls) don't allow us to realise the true historical and social significance of emergence of great religious reformers from the strata of 'Sudras' and 'outcastes'. Otherwise one loses the historical perspective of emergence of Sankaradeva- Namdeva, Tulsidas, Kabir, Nanak and the whole galaxy of known and unknown saints that emerged in India in a particular juncture of history and were able to give a human face to Hinduism. This was what has saved Hinduism from utter degradation, disgrace and possible annihilation in face of resurgent Islam (just as Hinduism had saved itself in past by abandoning obnoxious blood sacrifices - the Rajasuya, aswamedha and dakhyabali Yagnas and by adopting non-violence and vegetarianism in face of Buddhist challenge) Sankaradeva has to be viewed in this perspective also to have a fuller understanding of his historical and also cultural role. Sankaradeva's role is akin to that of many other saint reformers of his era - that of saving Hinduism, Indian culture and way of life by providing a way for the Sudra (the most innumerable component of India) and *stree* (women- the half world), to come into the forefront of religio-cultural practice through mass community participation. This process itself led to vastly downsizing, if not the total elimination of the need of an intermediary priesthood and softening the rigours of caste discrimination by reducing its role in religio-social observances. Otherwise Hinduism, or that 'Indian thought and way of life' would have survived today only amongst remnants of the Brahmins. Think about Kashmir and its Pundits.

The most beautiful and erudite sections of the lecture (and the book) are the sections dealing with Sankaradeva's philosophy, poetry and practice. The evocative discussion on Sankaradeva's portrayal and presentation of his thoughts through a scholarly and illuminating discourse on his writings and achievements, have achieved a rare poetic quality. As to Dutta's enquiry 'Whether poetry, religion and culture can generate and foster the idea of the unity of men'? the answer, at the end of the book, appears to be equivocal at best : but to say that 'the achievements of saints therefore denote, in the ultimate analysis, only their personal triumphs' would be akin to taking an uncharitable and historical view that may be accused of belittling the socio-political-cultural achievements and imprints of such men. One of the brightest gems in the book is the section added as supplement containing the English translation of ten Bargits – devotional songs written by Sankaradeva. The translation is not only masterly but show a great refinement and expressivity which has been able to convey in English the metre and matter of the saint's finest poetry. ❑

D.N.B.

<u>A sampler of Borgeet</u>

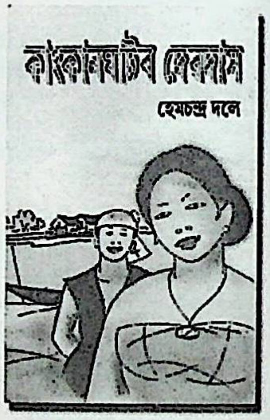
translated by Prof. Amaresh Datta

I fall at your feet, O Hari!
And solicit your kindness to save my life.
Wealth is poisonous and enfolding and a passing show
Man and money are fickle,
So are life and youth
Fickle too is this world of man,
Wife and children too are of no worth:
Where is that which endures?
Mind wavers as a drop of water on a lotus leaf
Nothing for a moment abides
And there is no happiness of the Lord's feet
In the grip of the joys of living,
Sankara prays, O Lord ferry me out
Of this ocean of sorrow,
You are the only giver,
Give us your kindness and love
And show us the way with your guiding hand.

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the joy and sorrow of creativity– the beautiful stories of Hemchandra Doley



Kangkanghator Devadas
Published by Bani mandir, Guwahati
First edition : 2003
pp : 62
Price : Rs. 40.00

It is only rarely that one comes across a writer who is not only talented but also gifted with deep insight. Hemchandra Doley is undoubtedly such a writer. His recently published short story collection titled 'Kankonaghator Devadas' amply bears testimony to this. (Ghat means a river crossing point – so the name may roughly translate to – Devadas of the River crossing of Kankona – or shall we say river port). Hemchandra comes from one of the major tribes of Assam – the Mishings, and he primarily writes about his Missing people and about Mishing society at the threshold of change.

Tribal and rural society are exposed to the influences of modernity mainly through youths who go out of their villages in search of education and employment. The same process has occurred to the Mishing villages of Assam. The advent of the modern is accompanied by its problems and contradictins between traditional values and newer ideas, clashes between the old and the new. All these have created social turmoil and strife. The fabric of social life of the tribe started fraying! Doley has faithfully tried to record these changes, the problems and the tragedies of his people and their world. Nature has also conspired to create newer problems for the people. Repeated devastating floods have totally ruined the traditional village economy – pauperizing the people. The villages once prosperous have now become virtual wastelands. Corrupt government machinery is apathetic and indifferent to the plight of the people. There is no relief no succour from any quarter, no ray of light at the end of the proverbial tunnel. And the results? Scores of young men from the tribal villages have become touts and pimps and young girls prostitutes. The problem of insurgency has also crept into the life of the villages. Scores

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of young men have disappeared from their home – either lured away by the fatal attraction or pushed by the dire compulsions of poverty into the murky world of insurgency, violence, gory death.

The author has described all these with a clinical detachment and impersonal touch of an experienced storyteller. He has not only the courage to find out the truth, but also to celebrate the eternal wellspring of life and love that throbs in the heart of man even in the most adverse and unlikely situations. This spontaneous humanism is the redeeming feature of Doley's stories.

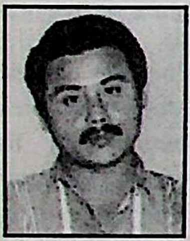
The title story of 'Devadas of Kankonaghat' after which the book is named, is obviously a very important story of the collection. The story is set in a remote place where even in this twenty-first century, boats rowed by professional boatmen across wide, and at times turbulent, rivers, are the main mode of transportation for the people. Doley writes about such an out-of-the-way, flood-devastated area along the great northern rivers of Assam, an area inhabitated mostly by the vibrant people of the Mishing tribe of Assam, that Doley himself belongs to.

That Doley happens to be a member of the Mishing tribe or that he writes mainly of his own people is not the reason why his stories deserve attention. It is the sheer beauty and talent of his creation, their humanity and universality, rather than their situational or ethnic novelty which attracts and commands attention.

The story about the boatman – a simple soul consumed with love and longing – appears to be a simple story, but its background is not at all simple. A city journalist is coming to the tribal village on the bank of Chapala river which one can only reach by crossing the river in the boat of our boatman. The journalist is coming for some exclusive material. He has come to know that a mysterious person, maybe a top leader of an underground outfit was hiding in that village (he covers himself with a wrapper – ri-bi-gaseng!), and the journalist wants to carryout an interview with him. On his way he meets a fellow-traveler in the bus and the boat, a fiery, bubbling youth – Murkong Pegu, who tells him sarcastically that, he would definitely get many stories in Kankona – the villages of the banks of Chapala are turning into terrorist hot beds and the girls of the place are being auctioned off in the bazars of the towns. The sudden vehemence of the comment startles the reader. When the journalist crosses the flood devastated areas, the paddy fields buried under silt and sand, and enters the villages, he does not get what he seeks. Nobody can tell him anything about the mysterious person. His stay for a couple of days in the village headman's house, his forays into the village were failures; he cannot learn anything about the underground leader. He comes to know only about the tragic story of the boatman of Kankona! He does not meet Murkong Pegu, only gets a hint from the boatman that he is not a easy person. On the night before the day he is to return, a military raid is conducted in the

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village. A few young men are picked up by the military and amongst them is Murkong Pegu too. It is then that he realizes that the villagers all along know about these things, they know who is hiding, who is the mysterious person who moves covering himself with 'ri-bi-gaseng', but they do not tell anything to the stranger from the city – a normal reaction of the villagers. The journalist returns to the city and does so with a bitter taste of not being taken into confidence by the villagers and the sad and tragic story of the lovelorn boatman of Kankona. This construction of texts within texts and the interplay of texts has given the story a rather poignant beauty.



Hemchandra Doley (b.1968) has established himself in the cultural world of Assam. An M.A. from Gauhati University, Mr. Doley has been associated with more than two dozens of films in various capacities (asstt. director, director & script-writer). He has a collection of short stories (Kangkanghator Devadas), a collection of essays and a biography to his credit. He has also edited a couple of monthly magazines in Assamese. At present, he is the executive editor of Priya Sakhi, a monthly magazine for women.

The boatman of the river crossing of Kankona, could have been of any place on this earth; so could have been the cowherd of another story 'the laughter of water fairies (Jolporeer hanhi). Yet Doley's stories depict the life and laughter, tear and tragedies, hope and happiness of the Mishing people with an authenticity that is fresh, a sophistication that is startling and a consciousness that's multi-layered. The author's own acquired urbane sophistication, that is yet to turn stale with tired cynicism, the warmth of his feelings for the people, which has not yet become cliche and his filmmaker's eye (Doley is a filmmaker too - which is trained to see more) have probably made it possible. You do require genuine love for the people to be able to produce good humane literature.

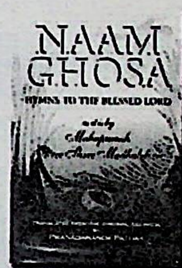
In 'the laughter of water fairies' – another beautiful story, Doley has drawn the picture of an youth about to reach manhood and at the same time, losing the innocence and certainty of his childhood world. The new and frightening world of adults, of enticements, of mystery and awakning of sexuality and the terror and guilt that accompany it, frighten the youth and the youth tries to run back to his home – seeking the warmth and assurance of the familiar world, not realizing that the old world has changed and disappeared in the meantime. Another beautiful and touching story of the collection is 'eta mudrar kahani' - the story of a coin – which depicts the simple belief of a village girl who has promised to offer a coin to Kamakhya temple when faced with danger, and of a young man a non-believer, from the same village now living in the city, who was entrusted with the task of giving the coin to the temple. The story gathers momentum through the clashes and contradictions of these two different types of mental makeup amidst lively socio-political satire.

The filmmaker in Doley manifests in the differently constructed writing 'Kaitiman agalpa – a bunch of non-stories' where Doley records various pictures, situations, changes and contradictions of the Mishing society. Occasionally the same characters appear in the different stories in different situations thereby creating a tenuous link between apparently unrelated stories and situations giving an illusion of continuity.

With this volume of stories Hemchandra Doley has emerged as a fresh, talented and very sensitive writer to be watch in the future. ☐

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trying to capture the beauty of Madhavadev's hymns



Naam Ghosa
Hymns to the blessed Lord
Published by Promila & Co., Publishers
First edition : 2003
pp :243
Price : Rs. 495.00
$25.00 (U.S.)



***Pranabananda Pathak (b. 1953)** graduated from Guwahati University in 1973 with a B.Sc. degree, and in 1977 completed his L.L.B. from the same university. A lawyer by profession, he joined the High Court Bar, Guwahati, in 1978 and has been a successful lawyer for the last twenty-five years. He is now Advocate General of Mizoram. Earlier he served as Additional Advocate General of Assam.*

Naam Ghosa has nearly an iconic status in the religious life of the Assamese Hindus. There is hardly an Assamese who has not heard the singing of its beautiful verses at least once in his lifetime. Imbued with the philosophical content of the Vaishnava Bhakti movement, this book of hymns was composed by Madhavadeva, the principal disciple and successor of Srimanta Sankaradeva.

When all the religions point out to the path of salvation, who is this adorable disciple indifferent to salvation itself? Who is this disciple before God, when the omnipotent – the fountainhead of love itself – submits himself? It is these philosophical intricacies that are the real beauty of the hymns.

The verses of Madhavadeva in ***Naam Ghosa,*** though apparently simple in the first read, are, in reality, a vehicle for carrying subtle messages. hidden meanings and concepts that are profoundly significant. Moreover, these verses are very tightly constructed in metre. These can be open to different interpretations by different people and the purists don't kindly look up to anyone trying give a new twist to accepted meanings. Translating these verses full of philosophical intricacies is really a daunting task.

Pranabananda Pathak has taken up this difficult task more as a labour of love than a literary endeavour and he has succeeded magnificently. Though there will always be different interpretations of the hymns and difference of opinion regarding their meanings, Pathak has been able to round up the work of translation into a coherent, purposeful and easily understandable whole. His translation is simple and straight and not mere 'word play' which at times becomes a barrier to approach to meaning. This faithful rendition by Sri Pathak will clearly convey the meaning and the nounces of Madavadeva's hymns to the readers who shall be reading them in English, possibly for the first time. Very beautifully brought out by Promilla & Co., Publishers in association with Bibliophile South Asia, New Delhi & Chicago, the book will go a long way towards its avowed purpose of bringing the beauty of the hymns of the Guru to people who cannot read and appreciate them in the original. ❑

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Saurav Kumar Chaliha and the quest of modernity



It will not possibly be wrong to say that modern Assamese fiction was born in the flux of **restless electrons** created by Saurav Kumar Chaliha in the short story of the same name more than half a century back. Chaliha's name was unknown to the literary world before that. The story won the first prize in a short story competition organized by the most prominent literary journal of that time – *Ramdhenu*. And when the prize winning story was published, there were widely different reactions often quite sharp. Some were appalled – a narrative that does not have a proper beginning or an end, no clear protagonist, no clear plot, such polyphony! Can this be a short story? Some were ecstatic – Oh, at last a proper modern story has been written in Assamese! Like all great pieces of creative literature, it has stood the test of time. It has widely been read and appreciated till now. And it has started a trend which produced a new crop of talented writers.

The story presents a deeply insightful picture of troubled times, at the most crucial juncture of modern Assamese history, when an emerging nation, free from the slavery of colonial masters, tentatively started the task of governing itself through a democratic system, tasting the bitter sweet taste of freedom, living through the fervour of a failed revolution and dashed hopes. It presents a picture of Assam in the independent India roughly between 1942-51.

And it brought to focus, for the first time, the emerging urban consciousness in the society of Assam. It was the consciousness that came with the birth of

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an educated modern middle class that didn't have its roots in rural-feudal exploitation (Zaminders and Mauzaders) and was in the painful process of losing its tenuous links with the past, with ownership of agricultural land and the rights of absentee landlordism due to post-independent (post-colonial?) churning of the society and release of new social forces.

The language of the story is quite distinctive (and it really posed a big problem to the translator). The writer seized the language – the construction of sentences, the niceties of composition then being followed by all the major Assamese writers, and stood it on its head. He turned everything topsy turvy and people observed with utter disbelief and consternation, and many with vicious or hidden glee that the result was a language more forceful, more expressive and nearer to the speech of the people, and to their surprise they saw that it was also elegant in its own way.

And it was modern – modern in tone and temperament, and expoused worldview. It threw away not only the yoke of the narrative, but also of the omnipotent narrator, of romanticism that ruled the roost, of idealism that informed 'action'. And it sacrificed all the literary deadwood at the altar of a non-idealised, neo-realistic style of fiction that sought to explore, often with unsparing truthfulness, what our participation in life is really like.

Yes, it was modern, and it created a whole new school of modernist writers who tried to look at the old world in a new way. (This volume has a sampler of them).

This translation of *Restless Electron* that has the approval of the writer, is now before the readers.



- Editor, ***Yaatra***

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restless electrons

Nikhil woke up in the morning to the strains of Ravindra Sangeet, a song not heard before. He strained his ears to follow its lyrics in vein. Opening his eyes he saw transparent light in his room. Through a hole in the window a sunbeam from outside streamed in like a small thin line, its path clearly marked out by the confused scatter of the floating dust particles. Linear propagation of light...

The smiling calendar girl from the wall in front greeted him. Reflected sunlight from the blades of the table fan dazzled his eyes. Stretching out his hand he opened the window. The faint voice of the child of his neighbour memorising word variations, the joy of white clouds from the blue sky, and overpowering everything, the strains of the morning Rabindra Sangeet from the radio floated in. The musical notes of the melodious singer mingled and dissolved with the happy waves of his reasonless elation like two coherent harmonic waves. He paused on the way to light the cigarette he had put on his lips - the matchbox tumbled into the bed with a small sound.

He remembered about last night. Looked with distaste to the film magazine lying near his pillow. And with more distaste than that he looked at his wet clothes, on the bed. Suddenly the fine morning was ruined for him, became a failed one. Why couldn't he warmly greet the morning sunlight? A hopelessness...

Beginning of the everyday routine. Handing him a cup of tea his elder brother's wife Bou said, 'You have to bring me those yards of cloth today without fail. You keep putting it off.'

'Huh' he replied quite inattentively. The last night's experience then seemed to him like a hideous unreal dream.

'No huh, take the money and start now. Otherwise the frocks won't get stitched in time...'

Yes, really hideous. But he was not willing to hold himself responsible for it. What's the problem to own up your wrongs? Are you such a coward? Don't you have that much of moral courage?

'Frock?' He suddenly started up. Questioned like a man lost.

'Why, aren't Sontis' family coming day after tomorrow?' Bou said, widening her

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eyes a little, 'for Ila and Neela...'

O yes, he remembered. Day after tomorrow his sister Sonti was coming. The faces of Ila and Neela floated before his eyes. They must have grown bigger than before, yes, and possibly more lovable.

'O Bou, please tidy up my room today.'

Bou couldn't help laughing. Nikhil was afraid. Sonti would not leave him alone if she saw this chaos in the house.

'That will be taken care of. Now you get started.'

'Why are you in a hurry? There is plenty of time.'

Bou made a strange face. Nikhil was suddenly surprised. He suddenly realised what the hurry was for. Bou was keen to show her heartfelt love for Ila and Neela. He thought as much.

'Manu's room has to be cleaned today. Sonti's habit of going after things! If she finds a little dirt 'its enough.'

Bou smiled an innocent smile. Is Nikhil a sceptic? Why couldn't he take the smile simply? He thought that Bou would immediately put the broom in maid Vimla's hands and start cleaning up the room. His sister Sonti would surely say - Father will see that for his daughter his daughter-in-law is getting cobwebs in her cloth... even leaving her own son in bed.... Sonti would further say that impressed by her display of sincerity father will silently praise his daughter-in-law, feel thankful to her. That smiling hint about Sonti's obsession with cleanliness, did it not also contain a hint of an unavoidable fate?

Or, lately he had turned into a man of very low mentality... 'in the name of caring for father, Bou is looking after her own interests,' when did his sister Sontiba put this kind of thought in his mind? chi chi-!

'What happened to Ranu's wound? Are you applying Burnol to it?'

'Doing it. The wound doesn't seem to heal.'

A line of worry appeared in Bou's face. Nikhil thought it was genuine. Bou placed a piece of bread in Nikhil's plate automatically. Nikhil saw Bou's expression was really genuine. He bit into the bread eagerly... What had brought about this change?

'Ailments don't seem to leave the house. Oh, have you heard, Nabin's mother got worse last night - doctor came at about two or half past two at night.'

'Is that so?'

'Yes. They are giving some one lakh or two lakh penicillin.'

Bou smiled at her admission of ignorance. That penicillin is measured in units of lakhs that was possibly like an incomprehensible joke to her. Nikhil found her smile beautiful ... she came out as a simple village belle. Again automatically Bou stretched her hand out and adjusted Nikhil's shirt collar that was turned inside due to carelessness. Cleverly saving his pack of cigarettes from coming into contact with

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Bou's hand, Nikhil got up.

Sound of coughing. Dry cough. Father was getting up from sleep. Surely he had not slept well last night. The eyes said it. The old man was burdened with a thousand worries. With the sound of his father's wooden sandals came the busy rustle of Bou's clothes, the light feeling in Nikhil's mind disappeared instantly again. He could hear sister Sonti's sarcasm - 'Oh, poor Bou hasn't got a moment's respite after father has got up from bed'.

Again, again, Nikhil - you are indulging in these low thoughts.... Water was already given in a small jug for washing, Bou hurriedly came and changed it with a large pitcher...

'Moina'

He went and stood near.

'Take money from daughter-in-law, change the pipe of my 'hookah'. It's completely ruined.

'OK'

The pipe was really damaged. Spotted with dark stains. The receptacle was also rusting. The edge of the earthen 'Chillam' was broken. With an expression of unhappiness the old man was smoking. Fidgeting at times; casting a disgusted look at the handles of the chair. Bed bugs had surely appeared in the chair again. Only the other day Bou had killed the bugs by pouring hot water.

His mind became agitated again. What had been Bou doing? Always busy with her own naughty children.

Turmoil raged inside his mind, felt great hatred for himself, last night's hideousness, displeasure with Bou - may be unfounded... suddenly he felt a great revulsion for the entire neighbourhood, the faces of the selfish... opportunistic people floated before his eyes like a movie.

'Bou, the bed bugs have possibly increased again. A bottle of DDT has to be brought today', - he went into the kitchen.

'DDT is not good. Absolutely useless. 'Ranjan spoke in a knowing manner. He indifferently observed the kitchen walls blackened with soot.

'Where have you come from - so early in the morning?'

'Mantu is running a fever since yesterday - I came to borrow the thermometer.'

'What has happened?'

What else! Running a fever due to flu. A thermometer is required for that.' His face showed irritation. It was clear that he was unwilling to give importance to the flu.

Bou looked worried. Ranjan clearly understood that Bou was not happy to give the thermometer. If it broke? If lost? One surely couldn't accept a replacement or the price out of civility. But still...

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Bou tried to bring a heartiness in her voice to enquire about Mantu's fever. Unseen by the others Nikhil grimaced and Ranjan felt a little uneasy.

'The kitchen has become very dark,' Ranjan tried to change the situation. According to Nikhil, Ranjan was a pedant. Proof of it came soon - 'No scope of reflection of light - the walls have become so black.'

'Yes, the smoke also disturbs a lot, makes tear come out of the eyes.'

'What is Moina doing? Can't he call a carpenter and have the two windows mended a little?'

Ranjan cast an authoritative glance towards Nikhil. Sitting in a low stool Ranjan extended his legs with indifference. The matter of Mantu's fever caused no reaction in his mind. He thought about other things. The sunrays were reflected from the tea cup in his hand.

'Bou, look this way. Do you see this curve on the tea inside the cup?'

'Where? Yes, yes, I see it now.'

'Do you know why it is seen? Moina, do you know it or not? It's called caustic curve. When sunlight...'

'What's it called? Kosti -' , Bou laughed out.

'Enough. You don't have to advertise your learning. We needn't understand all those...' ... Nikhil's voice had a tinge of irritation in it. His mood was bad since the morning.

'Yes, don't know the ABC and I would read the 'Ratnavali', Bou said. 'I have lots of work to do. Where do we have time to understand all that?'

She nicely made it understood that she lacked time. Pulling out the vegetable cutter she started cutting vegetables. Bou's gay smile however couldn't bring back Ranjan's spent enthusiasm.

'You don't have interest in anything. And Moina here, he will either sleep throughout the day or loiter around. You are going to hell'.

'I am going to hell? Why, for not understanding your - what's called - that caustic curve?'

'If you had heard me would it have been a great mistake? People should have an interest to know new things.'

Demonstration of wisdom ! Bou lifted her eyes from the vegetable cutter towards Ranjan and smiled one of her derisive smiles. That didn't seem to affect Ranjan. Nikhil suddenly became agitated. Interest to know ! He had known enough - which he would have been better off without. He had learned many nasty things, many have taught him grotesque things. And he was reaping the harvest from that. What Bou must be thinking looking at his thin, worn-out body, at his pimple covered face?

'Ignorance', he said slowly, ' is a blessing'.

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'That's true only when it is foolish to be wise.'

Nikhil was put off. He had never thought about it in this way. For the first time he looked towards Ranjan with admiration. Did Ranjan see that? He looked away quickly.

'Great,' Bou said, 'now that both of you are at it, how many more hours will your lecture will continue?'

Ranjan tried to avoid the old man's eyes. But his eyes were alert ... ... Worries of the world had weaken the old man, the eyesight must had weakened also, still it was difficult to deceive him. Ranjan sometimes became surprised - such a firm body still. He seemed to wobble, about to fall down while walking, but he never did fall. He felt sad, his face showed compassion, Nikhil became surprised, Bou possibly a little distressed, Ranjan made a great effort to hide it, he brought in a smile of amusement to his face - as if he was amused really - and whispered, 'Unstable Equilibrium'.

'Is it that you, Ranjan?'

He went and stood near, scratched his head. Told him about Mantu's fever.

'When are you leaving? When does the university open?'

'On twenty-second. I will leave on the nineteenth.'

'Are you studying properly? You must get a first class. Nothing did happen to Moina.'

Moina let out a sigh in the next room. He was sorry. But...

'You must go to Shillong once in between. Are you busy with anything?

'Shillong?'

'Go and see Dhan once. Yesterday I received a letter from Bap. He had again turned quite violent. You must go tomorrow.'

Lines of worry on the old man's face! It didn't occur to Ranjan to find out similarity between the curves he had known and the lines on the face of the old man. He only became a little worried.

Slowly, and with great calmness, Nikhil's father explained everything to Ranjan. For the last seven months or so, Dhan's been paralysed and meanwhile his mind gets disturbed - nearly mad he becomes. Worry, terror, lots of trouble. His madness is increasing. The old man himself was unable to go. Nikhil had lots of work here itself. He wanted to ask about Kon once. But looking at the old man he did not have the courage to do so. He was very much annoyed with Kon.

The old man's face showed calmness. The old man's face showed anxiety. He stretched out his hand and brought up the newspaper, he stretched out his hand and searched for his spectacle case. Ranjan saw that the old man was not getting the spectacles lying near by. That meant he was not able to see it clearly - of course the thing was a small one. That meant, Ranjan thought, the accommodation of his eyes had become less. How could Moina watch with such indifference

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the plight of his old father? He was a hopeless, good-for-nothing chap. Something had to be done.

Something surely had to be done, the father also thought about it. Old age would make him helpless and cripple - the old man was not ready to accept that. He had never himself complained to anybody nor had he remonstrated before anyone. He didn't know any opportunism and therefore he had suffered. Lots of money had been spent, he had paid lots and lots, but had got little in return. Health was going down day by day, the house was crumbling down, Moina's mother had died long back, Bap seldom enquires about him, he has a suppressed dissatisfaction... but his mind didn't allow him to talk openly about it with his daughter-in-law. Failing in the examination and without deciding whether he would appear again or not - what was Nikhil doing with himself? No time to look after the home. Dhan's madness above all these — he was compelled to sell a plot of land the other day... nobody was willing to talk nicely even for a little while, everybody wanted to avoid the old man. With a weak body, dimming eyesight, the old man tried to feel the pulse of the world from the newspaper...

'Bank stops payment...'

A prominent headline in the second column on page three. It was as if his eyesight dimmed suddenly, suddenly something started playing inside his brain, a vermin bit suddenly in his right palm, caused great pain and sucked a little blood. From the upper floor of the corner house, the incessant sound of a sewing machine came in, the old man couldn't make out the sound. The sunlight was waning, the daughter-in-law possibly passed by carrying something in hand, the clamour of his grand children could be heard, and near by, through the door, Ranjan and Moina had possibly gone out.

Ranjan and Moina stood by the window. On the veranda of the house in front, advocate's daughter Niru sat smartly in the cane chair.

On the pretext of studying for her intermediate arts examination she held a book in hand but furtively glanced towards them time and again. She was not bad to look at, dimples appeared in her cheek when she smiled. Nikhil sometimes fell prey to her glances. Ranjan commented - 'Coquetry'. Today morning, when Nikhil saw her, he became angry. A white cat jumped into Niru's lap, Ranjan barely could suppress his laughter. Niru became more distressed. Her married sister came out from the house, sat near her and became busy with knitting, Niru became busy with her book.

'Your father's eyesight is gradually deteriorating'.

'Huh'

'Nonsense. What do you mean by 'huh'? I always get angry when I think about you. What are you doing? What is the matter with you? Is your relation with your own home only economic and biological?

Nikhil didn't say anything.

'Would you appear in the examination this year or not?'

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A commotion. The brigade of small children came in noisily. The little brother fell from Illa's lap crying. There was a tug of war between Runu and Phunu over a wooden horse. Funu slapped Runu crying in high pitch.

'Silence!' Ranjan roared.

Silence for a moment. Then commotion again. Everyone discovered a new enjoyment. Everybody shouted 'silen-silen—'

'Boomerang', laughed Ranjan. Nikhil laughed forcefully. This gang of little children failed to evoke any reaction at all in his burnt-out mind. Why couldn't he join in their senseless laughter?

He felt himself to be useless, who was not capable of any work that could be done in this world, one who had been gradually ruining himself. Two little boys ran by the road in front, together they started flying a kite. The piece of yellow paper slowly reached a great height and its red tail fluttered in the air. Leaving her sewing machine for a while the wife of the Dutta-household looked at it for some time, Niru cast a glance of disdain. A smile slowly broke on Ranjan's face, some equations, some diagrams, some parallelogram of forces started playing inside his mind. He wanted to explain the theories regarding why a kite and an aeroplane flew to Nikhil, but when he looked at Nikhil's face his desire vanished.

An expression of irritation, of disgust, appeared on Nikhil's face. The people of the neighbourhood had started to become busy gradually. He saw it and thought about their low mentality, their opportunism, their greed for money. Naren's mother had been ill in bed for ten days but the advocate living in front did not deign to enquire even once. Dutta and his wife were swelling up taking bribes. Dealing with Kerosene and CI sheet on the black market, Mahendra Barsaikia was busy constructing his latest-design house. Lalit's mother, that old hag, was moving from house to house gossiping about others. Khagen Das a wartime contractor and currently a mysterious figure become blink drunk all the time. New radios had arrived in the neighbourhood and the din they created made life unbearable. The wheels of the new De-Soto and Ford cars turned lazily as they moved out of the garages in the neighbourhood. The condition of bank clerk Rambabu, the lawyer's clerk Chandi Kalita and the strata they belonged to turned slowly in, into the opposite direction. Chandi Kalita's youngest daughter' s frock was torn, baring her chest and it couldn't be replaced for last three months...

Indira Barua went by the road, a living symbol of make-up and natty dressing· Muktiar Ramani Sarma watched with disdain through the window. Dutta's wife wrinkled up her nose and turned her sewing machine faster for no reason, Abani, a third year student, stood still at the shop on the pretext of lighting a cigarette. Indira's scandal was gradually increasing in the neighbourhood.

Placing his 'chaddor' on his shoulder, professor Bhatta got onto his cycle. Jhunu came running carrying a football and a hand pump.

'Please pump up the ball, dada,' Jhunu asked Ranjan. Clad in white shorts, Jhunu's cheeks were round like a football. Girija Sarma, the manager of the next door, mess alighted from his bicycle - a healthy, gentleman wearing costly suits. He had

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become rich running a cloth shop.

'Jhunu come with me, I will pump it up for you.' Jhunu went running with Girija. Nikhil borrowed the cycle. He was always reluctant to borrow anything from people like Girija. He could barely tolerate the boarders of the mess next door, they appeared to him like something of a vulgar type. Still...

There was not enough air inside the tyres of the cycle. Leaving Ranjan he went to fetch the pump from Girija. The door was bolted from inside. Thunu's shouts came from inside. Thumping on the door, a sweaty Girija came out leaving the ball on the floor, Thunu came out nearly crying - buttoning up his shorts.

'Oh, this!'

'May, let the whole neighbourhood go to hell'. Startled, Girija Sharma the husband of a pretty wife and father of two children bumped into the door ledge and fell down.

Trying to analyse Girija's character, he stopped many a times. What was he himself? Physician, heal thyself...

He remembered an incident of two months back. Next door neighbour Rambabu's sister-in-law had arrived only a few days back. Acquaintance with him was barely of two weeks. One evening, he, the cultured gentleman, jumped over the wall ...still, what a coward he was, he then realised, panicking suddenly, he had fled ...

Niranjan talked about Freud. Expression of suppressed desire. Must be that only. Freud, Freud, Freud! He would turn mad. Why, all the obscenity that surrounded him on all sides, all the ugliness all around, the pictures of film stars on the walls on both sides of the road, the suggestive books and the sex magazines scattered on the tables, the sidelong glances of the drove of 'Indiras' with their swollen breasts! Weren't these in any way responsible for his disorder...?

Jati Babu came in and sat down.

'Interesting news, Police arrested Kamini Sarma in the morning today.'

Leaving her work behind, Bou came in with great enthusiasm, 'why? why? Tell me everything in detail.'

'Opium smuggling; clandestine dealings in opium was detected.'

Learning of such travails of a special patriot Bou became exuberant, she pressed them to tell the whole story. Father heard the news from the other room. He knew Kamini Sarma well. He kept silent. 'These are the leaders of our society. Corruption everywhere. This is but only natural, the terrible fetid stench that comes out from the rotting body of capitalism in its death throes - these are only the manifestations of that,' Jati Babu said.

Nikhil did not comment. Bou heard it with interest, though she did not understand it properly.

'Capitalism,' Jati Babu parroted a line he had got somewhere, 'stands on its last

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legs.' How long will this corruption continue? There is a limit to the tolerance of the people.' Nikhil was amused. Had Jati Babu turned into a real communist at last? He looked at his silk kurta with a little dissatisfaction. Bou had also observed it. A communist (for example our middle sister's son) meant a perpetually dirty creature with dishevelled hair — Bou's idea was like that.

'Communist lecture doesn't suit you,' Nikhil said laughing.

Jati Babu was little annoyed. He could understand the hint.

'The objective of communism is not to decrease the standard of living, but to increase it.'

So Nikhil kept quiet. Coming out he could feel the excitement in the air. In the afternoon there was a public meeting on the issue. Rumours and speculations. The 'adda' of the tea stall had become animated with this. The Socialists had become busy, to demanding due punishment for Kamini Sarma, 'johor coat' clad young men were sticking up wall posters.

'The doings of the Socialists are ludicrous.' Jati Babu pointed to a poster in disdain, 'you can call them gutter inspectors'. They like to create trouble over small things. But it's a sham when it comes to real issues. When revolution is mentioned, Jay Prakash keeps quiet. An opium trader had been caught, and they think it's a great event and make loud noises over it. On the other hand, they beat their victory drums after betraying every labour strike.'

Jati Babu's vituperations, in Bou's language.

Nikhil wanted to tell him, 'You are but Moscow's agent. You do whatever comniform asks you to do, why should 'high brows' like you involve yourself in troubles over an opium dealer.

Had Nikhil suddenly turned socialist? He laughed himself.

Politics is a troublesome thing - he thought. It is a thing for third-rate people, somebody had said somewhere. Possibly true.

What would Kon have done?

Perhaps he would have said, 'Kamini Sharma should be shot in the road. His lecture would have increased in intensity, the parties of the 'dalals' would have fled gradually. Dalal ko halal karo - away with all touts, middleman, it would have gradually become unbearable to Jati Babu, the arguments would have gone off in tangent - whether the present time was a revolutionary time or not, whether standing in election was a correct Marxist position or not, and in the end - whether Stalin betrayed the world revolution or Trotsky had spied for the Germans?

Who were actually fighting for the good of the country? Nikhil became confused, became troubled, felt ashamed of his ignorance.

Few days back he had been to his uncle's place. His uncle was the manager of a tea garden in upper Assam. Amidst the orderly and beautiful tea bushes he sought a little carefree. Sound of the factory running, rhythm of Jhumur dance, rumble of the lorries, he liked all this. He thought he would while away the time watching

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birds sitting on telegraph wires or reading books. He wanted to read some light literary stuff. Jati Babu had sent a volume of 'Two leaves and a Bud' with a long letter. He had kept it in his box with Huxley and Halt Crain. He read Virginia Wolfe's *Jacob's Room*; Meredith and Hardy...

The books were not finished. Unrest started in the tea plantation. And out of curiosity he had to read printed communist handbill (increase of wages, demand for suitable quarters, the affair of scolding a fitter, etc.). He had to read the call for struggle of the Panchayat Union - cyclostyled; the compromise proposals of the socialist - lecture from atop a truck and news written by staff reporters in the newspapers. The coolies one day surrounded his uncle's house, someone had manhandled the Sahib, the communists and the socialists blamed each other, coolies held a meeting, meeting of the Board was held. The police came, bullets flew, the military came, comments and statements, arrests and expulsions, enquiry committee and tribunal...

He came back. Where was peace in the world? Everywhere in the world 'oppressed peoples' (favourite words of Jati Babu) struggles were going on — Jati Babu said — and why should Assam be left out of it. Considering the situation in Assam the movements here should have been faster.

Jati Babu said that the movements were but the preparation for struggle. Father said, 'lawless elements' (reference the editorial of his newspaper). Kon had said to Bou, 'we are passing through a revolutionary period - these are only expressions of that.' Ranjan was immersed in his differential equations, Bou thought about Runu's stomach upsets.

Kon was wandering around avoiding the eyes of the police, Jati Babu was moving around giving his scholarly lectures, Jawaharlal was talking about lots of plans, due to the socialists nothing but paper posters could be seen on the walls bordering the road.

What do the people want? Very simple, they want to eat, they seek the right to live like men. Fine, but why so much of groupism, such complexities?

Jati Babu said, 'Sorry, but you are naive'.

Most probably. Maybe Ranjan too. Ranjan was not ready to accept it. He blamed all the political parties, and praised all of them one day after seeing a joint statement. Jati Babu tried to explain to him the main points and reasons of difference of opinion and the troubles amongst the political parties. Ranjan said, 'wait, think of an atom. There is positive charge in its centre and circling it are the negative charges. Proton and electron. In addition to these two are the Neutrons - the chargeless particles. In the world there are the good and are the bad; there are the correct, and the incorrect, and in addition there are the neutrals - the Neutron, yes, you can call them neutral. Each thing has two sides to it, see it from the atom. Why should the political parties be an exception? Why should the people be out of it? How would you leave out the society? There are lots of complexities between force and counterforce - starting from the atom to everywhere.

'Agreed.' Jati Babu couldn't get at his intention.

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'You are trying to convert me (Jati Babu forcefully moved his head from side to side in denial, but Ranjan went on). Good. But why is there difference between proton and electron, what is the reason, if I don't concern myself with these things, do you have any objections?'

'I am not really getting at what you are trying to say'

'You will understand. I have acknowledged the difference, but I don't feel like writing a thesis on it , whether you feel the need I don't know. From their antagonism, some truths emerge before us — there are facts, there are figures.

Basing on that, say, we design the radio valves. Remember, electron and proton are found in their millions, even in a little matter. The number of atoms held by a drop of water, with that number of tennis balls the whole world can be covered. Therefore like a great body of population, the laws of electron are also purely statistical. On that basis, on the basis of these broad statistical laws, without going into their antagonism, their contradiction. If I can give you a new valve - which - (wisecracking show, 'pedanticism let loose' - Nikhil smiled) would increase the amplification, increase fidelity, will you have anything to complain about?'

'Obviously not. But...'

'I want to say precisely that.'

'I couldn't follow it,' Jati Babu looked dismayed - 'but the initial part of what you said is admirable dialectics. Still...'

'I don't have anything more to say. Just think over it.'

What Jati Babu thought couldn't be made out, possibly he thought that he should not try to explain things to Ranjan any more. From his utterings - Jati Babu couldn't really make out what actually Ranjan was. Escapist or deranged mind? ('I mean perverted.')

Who are moving around with what kind of thoughts? Suddenly he was shocked out of his reverie. A group of college girls passed near by. He looked mechanically. Possibly a greedy expression appeared in his eyes. He was ashamed. When he reached home he realised that already he had again become deranged. Following his glance Jati Babu saw picture of a Hollywood glamour girl on the wall. A symbol of bad taste. Advertising obscenity in the name of a thrilling story set in South sea islands. 'Cinema, theatre, literature and radio - through all these media peoples' taste is being degraded in the interest of the capitalists. So that people can stay away from revolutionary thoughts, so that militant mentality won't develop in their mind. Towards that end only, these divisive measures are being taken by the Hollywood capitalists,' Jati Babu said.

The matter struck him as an especially strong point of communist propaganda. However, he didn't dare to protest. He remembered Niru, remembered the Khasi girl of Shillong. Remembered how Mahibulla master severely thrashed his daughter one day for the offence of ogling on the shy, and how after that incident the window of his house was completely closed. To put all the blame on a particular social system struck him as a laughable thing. Who would he hold responsible for his own strange thinking and his maddening thoughts? Should he agree to Jati

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Babu's sayings? Jump from Freud's 'healthy mind' to the communist's 'healthy society'? Jati Babu said, 'Mans' thoughts are dependent on his surroundings' -

On his surroundings! Their neighbourhood !

Yes, it might be true... Still, he clenched his teeth in futile anger against some invisible power. He became angry on himself for not being able to analyse and think simply like Jati Babu. He sought a refuge, he held everyone of them guilty, he wanted to draw the curtains of his window and cry ..., he thought like a mad man, thought like a pervert, he burnt Makhoni's letters, smoked many cigarette, and looking at the smoke curling up he ultimately felt a sort of self-satisfaction... as if he had arrived at a firm decision with a stable mind ... he rejected everyone of them.

'She also lieth in wait as for a prey, and increaseth the transgressors among men... her house is the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death...'

'Interesting!' Suddenly Jati Babu shouted, 'who has torn off the paper that was struck here.'

Yes, somebody had torn off the paper that had Kamini Sarma's incident in it. The picture of the Hollywood girl was still there near the torn piece like something without an enemy in the world.

'The Police tore it off,' the panshop owner said, handing over the pack of cigarette to Nikhil. Jati Babu glanced towards Nikhil in such a way as if that incident had suddenly exposed some deep secret about the social system.

'Police also like glamourous girls?'

Jati Babu's laughter struck Nikhil as something obscene. Somehow he could not enjoy his humour. The panshop owner understood it possibly, he laughed exposing his red beetle-nut stained teeth.

Jati Babu's expression slowly disappeared. In the glow of fluorescent lamp from the stationery shop, Nikhil didn't find Jati Babu repulsive, he looked like a family man devoted to his wife. He started buying small things for his wife - Nikhil thought his face had softened with a tender expression.

Jati Babu also has a family! Pickpockets, scholars, terrorists, lumpens, communists, capitalists everybody raised a family, it thing struck as something really strange. Ranjan said - it is a support one can depend on, one can put his mind to, an occupation where one can fulfil his duty - for these reasons possibly man starts a family. Marx also had a family, whether Jati Babu would consider it from a biological angle only ? He thought. Ranjan said, 'He does not want to prove his theory, but its his belief, may be a strange belief. The water particles in the clouds - even for their construction, a fine dust particle is needed, a nucleus, an electron, a support; trying to explain Milikn's determination of electronic charge - Ranjan had commented like a philosopher. For stability, for construction, a base is required. In Wilson's cloud chamber also, dew drops formed on electrons, the same thing, a support, something to rely on the way - a family - wife, politics, mathematics or a violin.

A very rash surmise, irresponsible conclusion - thought Nikhil.

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Union with one's wife is for a son' - Niranjan had commented, lasping into Sanskrit (*'Putrarthe kriyate Varjya'*) he had a derisive smile on his face. Jati Babu protested, severely criticised our old reactionary philosophers and their holy books. There is no liberty for women in capitalism, only in socialism would women flower to her full potential - Bou liked that comment very much that day, it was very apparent from her talk.

The evening floated away in waves of thoughts.

Home. An uneasy silence. Had father gone to sleep? The lights are out in his room. Faint sound of an orchestra floated from the mess near by. He nearly fell down bumping against the threshold. Tired with the day's work, Bimala had rested her head against the wall near the door and had dozed off to a half-sleep. He suddenly gave a start and thought whether father had woken up in the commotion? From the light bulb in the front veranda of advocate's house light fell on the threshold, Bimala's sleeping figure could be seen clearly, light shone through the window panes of Niru's room, she must be studying hard for the exam ... hope father hasn't woken up? No sound, surely he had not woken up. He crossed the room on tip toe - looked towards the curtain of father's room. Father must be sleeping. With his high blood pressure, excessive anxiety, and dimming eyesight, father had no option but to take refuge in his bed from the evening. Sometimes one or two aged people from neighbourhood came to visit, then they would sit outside in the near dark veranda and talk in a low voice, discuss things, share their thoughts. No excitement from the brilliantly illuminated road outside touched the old men, in the fag end of a long, troubled - painful life, his father lay like a cripple...'

The kitchen. The mother had dragged Phunu from sleep and was feeding him rice. Fish bone repeatedly got struck in his throat and he looked at his mother helplessly. But Bou wasn't able to pay attention to him, Bou repeatedly seemed to get distracted.

Leaning on a pillar he heard the bad news from Bou. Everything became disarrayed, he felt as if there can be no worse news in the world than the failure of a bank ... his father's worried face floated before his eyes, it was as if he saw the lines of anxiety had not yet made their appearance on it. There is pain in this world, we have to bear the pain, we have to bear these with equanimity the pain and the bad news, we must pass the tests of God without faltering - a philosophy like this, a attitude like this, being a son, why he could not develop? Why, his father had not felt it necessary to talk to him even once on this - he had accepted the news with equanimity. The serene, unconcerned face became brighter in his mind's eye, he wanted to bow his head in respect, it was as if he wanted to say spontaneously - father, I am also readying myself for the coming bad days with courageous unconcern, I am also your son. Worrying about tomorrow I won't shrink in my duty today. ...Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof...'

But why couldn't he? 'The pity of it, Iago, the pity of it!' about to bow his head he stopped, he remembered he was a worthless, useless son without any moral fibre; he felt that instead of indulging in useless sentimentality he had some responsibility to bear. - He was the son of a home where the mother was no more, the younger sister had died, he was the eldest of a home where a younger

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brother was insane, yes, a thousand times, he was the eldest (The eldest brother Bap had practically no relation with home).

But what would he do? What did he know?

Leaving everything aside had father gone to sleep in search of peace? He peeped through the gap in the curtains. There flowed soft conversation in the room. Father's mosquito net was not yet fixed, the large old trunks and cabinets all around stood like some indistinct statues. A faint light entered through the window near the headend of the bed and fell on the big old table, on the old books kept on it, an antique smell and feeling pervaded the room. The room reeked with smell of tobacco, father smoked sitting on the bed, gurgling sound emerged from the *hookah*. Sitting on a chair by the side of the bed, Karunababu was blowing at the *chillum*, in the weak glow that emerged occasionally, their faces could just be faintly made out - at other times Nikhil would have thought, two characters from a Dickens novel had come to life.

Karuna Babu greatly respected father, but he did dare to offer any sympathy in his troubles, but he was always ready to offer company.

Through his long association with the old man he had found an ideal man - who had, through all the tempests of life, never allowed any blemish to fall on his character, who had not done anything unjust despite the various opportunities. Despite helping everyone who had not asked any favour in return, nor had he complained even once. Just the other day, under his very eyes, the cheat Naren had fled to Bombay without clearing the debts - causing him harm no end, still the old man...

'That he would disobey me I never thought.'

Nikhil's heart trembled. Was he speaking of him?

'What shall I tell you ! These are the curses of the times, 'Yuga dharma.'

Karunababu lost the thread of talk

'He should have looked towards home at least once. He has seen the condition.' Father's voice had a note of unhappiness without rancour.

'Why are you unhappy? He has a conviction, he has realised that this way is good way; he is guided by his conscience. He has not joined the underground for child's play,' Karuna Babu tried to explain.

Father didn't say anything. The sound of smoking in silence. He didn't want to oppose anybody's belief. Still, had it been after completing studies - no, no boy of the present generation wanted to understand these things. As if studies are of no consequence. They say 'education for slavery'. He didn't want to argue about the education system. Maybe he had started liking Kon better than Moina from the last few days. Kon at least was trying to do something.

But doing what? Gangsterism, robbery, murder. That's what one heard. How could the old man support those? He had prayed to God to bring his son back to good ways, to the correct path, but had God listened. His own son had gone down to the level of inhumanity, the old man's heart darkened at the thought.

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'They have created unrest in the country, people have seen this only. Where is their loyality to the country?'

'We have apparently seen that only, but how many of us have tried to understand the real thing? But my mind never says that Kon and his group — but why only Kon's group, everybody, everybody from different parties — they all had to do these for an ideology.'

A heartfelt conviction sounded in Karuna Babu's voice.

'Violence,' the old man said slowly, 'under any pretext violence is sinful.'

'That's a matter of opinion.' Karuna Babu at last stated boldly. The old man was somewhat surprised.

'They say, that means a group of people say, the government today is totally fascist. There is no scope to start an organisation openly - whether among the peasants, labourers, middle class — there is no opportunity for starting any organisation at all. No freedom to hold a meeting, people don't have the right to write a few words in newspapers. Therefore armed revolt - what you can say, capturing power through a revolution - they see no alternative to that. Violence is required for it. They say, 'The end justifies the means.'

A sarcastic comment from the old man -

'Killing, robbery, arson - that means these are justified!

'A revolution implies atrocities,' Karuna Babu said with courage.

Silence for some time.

'I did not oppose him as such,' the old man said slowly, 'if he wants to go for a cause, I do not have the right to oppose it. But he took a very drastic step...'

It was as if the old man blurted out of a long-held secret, the mind became lighter with it. As if a confession. The doubts cleared immediately from Nikhil's mind. He felt his father's words to be a sort of blessing on Kon, a shower of congratulatory permission. It was as if he realised anew that Kon was his brother, he had a close relationship with Kon. Father's assent to Kon's deeds (likely to have born out of unwillingness) would definitely touch Kon, no matter in what inaccessible, impenetrable places, in what kind of terror-filled life or hunger he found himself in. The feeble sound of the orchestra suddenly became clear, somebody must have increased its volume, as if a piece of merriment suddenly floated in to the tune of his father's words...

Karuna Babu came out. He adjusted the spectacles, looked once the old man's room, then called Nikhil -

'Where is your Bou? Ok, ok, there is no need to call her — Listen, go and bring Nalini doctor at eight o' clock in the morning tomorrow. I have talked to him today.'

'Doctor Nalini?'

'Father's blood pressure needs to be checked.'

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Nikhil felt ashamed hearing Karuna Babu. Karuna Babu however didn't pay any attention to him. He himself was a little ashamed, he had uttered some high sounding words before the old man. To remove the layer of bitterness from the old man's mind, he had given quite a lecture in support of the boy even against his own will.

His own asthma was getting worse, Karuna Babu said. He came back seeing him off to the door. Father had not slept till then. In the soft glow of the dying embers one could make out that he was thinking. Where is Kon now? What are the travails of a life on the run? He is not ill with some serious disease, is he? Who knows, what he might be eating from where... remembered suddenly about Dhan, remembered his desire for higher education, he wanted to send him to England. He remembered Moina's friend Amal, his ship must have sailed from Bombay on last tenth, Moina had given the news. Dhan, yesterday's bright student, is now mentally deranged! Suddenly as if a bomb went off somewhere, a pistol cracked, a group of peasants snatched away rifles from the police who have put such poison inside the peace-loving Assamese people, the simple peasants — this clamour, this trouble all around, this intermingling of smoke and cordite on the road... he felt as if Kon had been captured, he was being beaten mercilessly, kicked in the chest with boots - a terror entered his mind, a sense of apathy came over for a moment... He had not seen Sonti for a long time, she would arrive soon - it would bring a good feeling anyhow. In the opaque darkness his gaze fell on the wall opposite, could make out the outline of Gandhiji's picture his hand lifted in a gesture for peace could discern the peaceful and serene expression of the face, his mind turned bitter lost his faith in mankind. People crucified Jesus, shot dead Abraham Lincoln, and going down to the level of animals finished off Gandhiji too.

What would people live with in this world?

The shadow of war hanging overhead, the terrifying prospects of atom and hydrogen bombs, a sick, opportunistic, violence prone human race... the glow of embers slowly died down...

The door to Manu's room seemed open. Nikhil saw it was crammed with small knick knacks. He remembered, Bou had arranged the house today, elder sister Sonti was coming - he remembered that. The room was quite clean - Bou definitely had to work much. He blamed himself, how he, the young man, had floated around allowing Bou to work like that. She had not said anything, but had she not disliked him at heart. He felt nice towards Bou suddenly, anyway was she not the wife of his elder brother. How she, in addition to looking after her unruly children, had been running the broken household! Did he ever had to suffer for anything in Bou's presence. Oh, the talk of sister Sonti about the trait of 'showing off', had father ever got any discomfort even for a small thing from Bou? ...if the dirt of life surrounds Bou, for that can she be held responsible? He thought about his own situation. The face of Bou feeding Phunu rice floated before his eyes - the inattentive face of Bou. His complex Bou had also genuinely felt the sorrow of loss of money in the bank. Bou's life had been bound up indivisibly with this home - both in pleasure and sorrow - This household's happiness was Bou's happiness, its sorrows, Bou's sorrows.

Eldest son Makhan had gone to sleep resting his head on the study table. He felt

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sleepy.

The light bulb holder in his room had gone out of order (shall have to show it to Ranjan). Dirty red kerosene burnt in a lamp, the glow had touched Makhans face. A wall lizard climbed on the list of algebra formulas pasted on the wall before him, the shirt put on the handles of the chair had fallen off to the ground... suddenly he became angry with his neighbours. Playing the radio day and night they had created obstructions to the study and exam preparation of the boys of the locality. Easy money ! Bhuban died suffering from typhoid, but they didnot turn off their radios even for a day. Maybe this was what Jati Babu had called the curse of civilisation... he turned down the lamp, did not feel like waking Makhan. He entered the kitchen.

Bou was not there. She was asleep in her room. Bed bugs had appeared in the bedstead, laying the bed on floor and holding Runu near her bosom Bou had gone to sleep with her children, tired. Moonlight entered through the window. He suddenly discovered the picture of 'glorious mother' in Bou's face - the feeding bottle shone in the moonlight. He could make out the closed 'Kirtan Ghosa' at her head end - the leaves reddened with vermillion. Sometimes she turned its pages all alone...

For sometime he stood without moving.

Bou had actually not gone to sleep, in some house at a distance there was some 'Naam', religious chanting, a sound entered through the window intermittently. In her sleep Bou heard indistinctly - 'O Gopala, Govinda, O Son of Jadu, we take refuge in Krishna's feet' - in a sublime peace Bou had forgotten the complexities of the world - the sleep was about to overcome her, Bou forcefully tried to hear the chants.

Suddenly she woke with a start. Maybe a mosquito had bitten on her forehead. Moina called, 'Bou, O Bou, get up. Won't you give me dinner?'

The sound of drums and cymbals slowly disappeared, the chanting nearly came to an end. Putting on the light Nikhil started to write a letter. He had not written to Makhani for a long time. Surely she was not able to forget him. He now blamed his convoluted mind for his senselss dislike for her.

The old days came back to his mind in a variety of ways. College and cultural movement, girls and showing off. Anarchy in all things - the days passed in the company of an intellectual circle. Makhani and her singing, a little of communism, a little of poetry, a few years filled with hypocrisy and self-delusion...

Suddenly remembered Kon and Dhan. Amal was now on a ship bound for England. Misra's restaurant floated into his memory again. Remembered its intellectual 'adda'. A partitioned cubicle inside. They frequently occupied the room, sweated profusely trying to meet the obligations of credit. In the sarcastic comments of Misra's partner - his elder brother (who had the habit of trying to pull up the trousers about his waist in vein) the intellectual circle was distressed, maybe the

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boys working there also laughed at them secretly. They heartily enjoyed the music from the radio of the shop, their editorial board created storms in a tea cup over their cultural magazine. They tried to remain disassociated from the self centered people outside, tried to keep distance from economic and political complexities. None of them were seen in any meeting of college or outside, never joined any procession, when the news bulletin started in the radio their face showed irritation. High thoughts, poetry and drama, girls and love letters. Still there was no dearth of unpleasant events - avoiding the 'no credit' signboard they cleverly entered the shop, Misra's elder brother's face reflected irritation occasionally, the sales boy hinted at the bad habit of sitting for an hour with a single cup of tea, to denigrate them, Misra's brother occasionally turned off the radio, put off one of the two lights, and their dramatic exclamation returned like a taunt to their own ears - 'light, more light'...

Still they were able to create a splendid situation away from the garbage and commotion of this world - they were proud of that. Maybe a procession of labourers and middle class people passed outside with great commotion, roaring vehicles passed, Misra repeatedly turned off the radio in irritation. Lampooning radical thoughts and communist propaganda, denouncing the roaring vehicles of the money greedy rich, they remained immersed in their own narrow but momentum-filled situation, stable, certain and carefree. The lights of the shop suddenly went out. A fuse had burnt out somewhere, some cups and plates fell down somewhere, a shout and a commotion, the strains of 'Bhimpalashi' stopped abruptly. Still, animation didn't return to the circle, a match stick flared in the darkness, one after another long white cigarettes entered it from the dark, strange shadows of cups and saucers and men fell on the walls, only the cigarette ends glowed in the dark, the group of bohemian intellectual patiently sat for reconnection of the electrical system (unable to fix the lights at home Ranjan that day realised the uselessness of his education, for the first time he felt disrespect towards an education where there was - no relation between theory and practice...)

But in the end everything became meaningless. Where did the members of their circle floated away, oh, what had they become ! Amal was on the way to England, Jatin was eating C-division food in jail, some became teachers, some clerks, some professors. Everybody was going on with their own business, Himangshu vanished. One day he was listening to music before the cinema hall, suddenly he met Biresh. Both the friends could not speak for sometime out of happiness, then Biresh slowly revealed himself. He offered State Express cigarettes from his pocket, invited him to watch the movie in special class, the bright light of the theatre shone on his face, eyes and expensive sweater. He simply expressed his misgivings at this new found aristocracy of a clerk of the supply department, Biresh didn't hesitate to confess, yes he took bribes, took it by design, on principle.

'Gather the manna my brother, everyone in the world is moving around with the intent to rob.'

Biresh had accepted the philosophy of the materialistic world. They talked about many things. Who was where, what Jatin was doing in jail, what was the news about Makhoni? Amal's journey to England; sarcasm regarding their cultural efforts,

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the rotten ways of the world - Biresh himself had become a friend of corruption. What's the news about Narayan? Narayan Hazarika? Why, he had committed suicide long back.

Nikhil was dumbstruck for some time.

'There is a tide in the affairs of men...'

'What did you say? Oh, Shakespeare! I have forgotten everything brother...'

Very natural, very natural. How would Shakespeare survive amidst files, accounts and Marwari businessmen? The loudspeaker music stopped, it was time for the movie to start, Biresh took leave hurriedly.

He moved around on roads as if in a trance, as if the world was floating - he was floating. 'There is a tide ...' The people were talking loudly — what were they thinking? Creating only waves of sound, Ranjan used to say. Narayan Hazarika! The world had then killed him in the end! A great promise had died! He felt suddenly as if Ranjan's words were right; the world is nothing else, but a play of waves, words, songs were only waves in the air. The sunlight and heat were some waves only ... electromagnetic waves. Even the electron was also wave - waves of probability. Wireless waves in the radio. All the words, all the happenings of the world are matters of continuous garlands of waves - coming and going, a dynamic undulation - that would come and leave. Narayan too came, he had left. Father might...

The train also came and the train left. Leaning on the gate of the crossing he watched the light of the distant signal with Jati Babu and Ranjan. The rail fare had been increased by the rich men's government, Jati Babu said. Ranjan did not say anything, Nikhil did not say anything. The comment was quite out of context, Jati Babu realised. Like small boys the three of them were waiting to see the train as if it was a thing they have not seen before. The thought surprised them. The three of them saw the distant red light, Nikhil did not find anything to say, Jati Babu became hesitant to bring in the hint of 'red world', 'merely a wave with wave length of 6563 x 10^{-8} centimetre' - Ranjan did not like to comment thus. Buying cigarettes from the nearby Nepali shop the three of them waited there, as if the eternal scene of coming and going touched all of them in that frozen corner of the town in the silent night. A huge mechanical monster, a giant like the one - eyed giant Polyphemus, piercing sound of the whistle, unromantic compartments crammed with crowds ('travel comfort is not for the common people' - Jati Babu) and the loud working of its pistons ('thermodynamic cycle' - Ranjan), the train amazed them and passed away.

As like a floating wave ...

Only manifestation of difference of longer or shorter wave length, therefore of red or yellow; the essential difference between Roentgen ray and gamma ray...

Ranjan is a learned fool, thought Nikhil.

'The whole matter is beautifully dialectical.' Jati Babu said, 'From increase and

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decrease of quantity occurs a qualitative transformation - that's one of the main things of dialectics. Transformation of quantity into quality and vice-versa.'

Jati Babu is a canvasser, Nikhil thought this time.

The night became quite advanced - long back, the religious chanting stopped long back. The people had gone to sleep. Sound of father's coughing.

Late at night the motor car of mysterious Khagen Das returned. Opium trade? No, the signs of night revelry clear on his face. Wine and women...

Sound of father's coughing — faint but clear. Diminishing sound of Khagen Das' car. Night had the power to cause pain ...

'But dawn would break at last.' Head seemed to reel, memory of the train came to mind. Makhoni was going off to her father-in-law's place on that. Wheels of that train seemed to be turning inside the head...

The wheels brought him back from sorrow to happiness. Phunu's new tricycle bumped in the door. Madness of motion in the three wheels, along with it the free laughter of a child (Sontiba's husband had bought him a new tricycle).

Coming home after a long time an unending stream of words emerged from Sonti's mouth. Ila, Nila ran and hid behind their mother at Nikhil's voice, their hair repeatedly fell on their forehead. Phunu, Runu and others started a cacophony of happiness, Bou threatened to beat them up with Makhan's ruler, they hid themselves behind the door. Brother-in-law brought biscuits for them. Brother-in-law laughed, Bou also laughed. Even a thin smile appeared on father's face.

Sister Sonti had put on weight, Ila Neela had become very lovely. Brother-in-law was quite hefty to start with, a big face, big bush shirt, big moustache. In two days his friendship with Makhan bloomed. He had great interest in sports. Both of them talked nothing except the sports field...

In two days the house changed like magic. Sister Sonti cried greatly at the condition of the house, Bou thought silently - 'oh, look at her'. New curtains fluttered in place of the old dirty ones, cobwebs disappeared, brother-in-law brought a large quantity of fruit for father from the market. Sonti arranged for small fishes to be brought for father everyday, 'small fishes are beneficial for eye ailments.' As if somebody had smeared lime on Bou's face...

Ranjan brought bad news. Dhan's condition was extremely frightening. He beats whoever he gets near him, doctor's head got split in his ravings. Father silently took to bed, brother-in-law gave up talking about sports, sister Sonti again started crying.

'There is only sorrow in our fate.'

'No use being a pessimist,' Jati Babu tried to reason.

Silently the watches of the night passed. To break the uneasiness brother-in-law started telling his travel tales, the fascinating stories of Ajanta and Ellora.

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After some time the situation became bearable. Nikhil did not say anything, nor did Ranjan. As if Ranjan wanted to stop talking with Nikhil, he had such a feeling. 'I have heard all about your exploits,' Ranjan said, 'what did you do with Blue bell?' Nikhil hung his head like an accused... Dhan's condition repeatedly came to everybody's mind. Suddenly brother-in-law realised that nobody was paying attention to his talk. Sonti was sobbing, Bou was looking sideways at the new curtains with displeasure, Ranjan and Nikhil's faces showed enmity, Jati Babu attentively tried to hear some sounds from father's room.

Maybe Jati Babu was feeling sad for father.

Brother-in-law suddenly stopped his lecture.

'What happened then, what happened?'

'No - let it be for today.'

No body protested, the time passed in uneasy silence.

'Brother Ranjan, please do me an extra.'

Makhan spoke in a whisper, as if dictated by the situation. Ranjan felt relieved getting to do a thing he could. He immersed himself in Makhan's geometry.

'What will happen to father? Rubbing her eyes Sonti said breaking the silence.

'Yes, one feels sad,' Brother-in-law let out a sigh, 'there is nobody to take good care at this old age -'

The words hurt Bou. After saying it innocently, brother-in-law realised that he had done an unjust thing. He became angry with himself.

Bou and Sonti rapidly exchanged a glance. Both Nikhil and Ranjan didn't like it.

'Kon had only that to do.' Sonti said unhappily ... 'They have started trouble in our plot of land. Father told me today, the peasants there had stopped giving us our share of paddy.'

'Disturbed area was declared there on day before yesterday.' Brother-in-law said without having anything else to do.

'Full fledged terrorism has started there,' Jati Babu added. 'Land owner's house has been burnt down, granaries of the rich are being looted -'

'Those are your job only', Nikhil said.

'Not ours, communists do not do such things. Communism and terrorism are not the same.'

Silence for some time.

'Whatever little paddy we got, that also is gone now,' Bou said.

'Kon - at this old age of father ...' brother-in-law suddenly stopped.

'People like father are selfish', it came out suddenly from Nikhil, 'the paddy is gone - what's the matter, one has to let go things that will go anyway.'

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Everyone was surprised hearing such talk from Nikhil - Sonti got angry.

'Have you ever thought how the household is running? You also talk such?'

'For greater interest -'

'For greater interest, ha, Jati Babu said slowly. 'But what Kon and his friends are doing - we call it terrorism.'

Ranjan became angry with both Nikhil and Jati Babu.

'In what type of society did your father try to become a man? Jati Babu, you only say in that time there was tremendous oppression of British imperialism. The social system then did not give them any ansurance of life, food or shelter. And in that situation they could make a livelihood only by great labour. Now if today those means of livelihood, that plot of land and the little paddy go away from their hand, won't they be sad for them? Are they to be blamed for their desire - of private property?'

Jati Babu and Nikhil looked at each other.

'Aren't you not responsible for failing to convince the older generation?'

Jati Babu did not say anything.

'Jati Babu will convince people against terrorism?' Nobody knew why suddenly brother-in-law became sarcastic. Everybody was surprised. A great leap from football, cricket to politics.

'Oh, but they want only communism -' Bou said as if she had not understood.

'Definitely'. Jati Babu became a little agitated 'Don't Kon and his friends call this terrorism? What do they call it?'

'Partisan warfare,' Ranjan quipped.

Jati Babu paused. He groped for his collection of theories.

'Is Jati Babu a communist?' After all this time Sonti asked in surprise. Jati Babu remained silent as if acknowledging it.

'My feeling is,' Ranjan said, 'considering the situation of our country, a communist has either to be in jail or has to go underground.'

As if somebody had slapped Jati Babu. Brother-in-law uneasily shrugged and shifted in his seat. Bou really did not understand, Sonti-ba tried to smile sympathetically. It was as if Ranjan had totally exposed Jati Babu's hypocrisy, Nikhil had such a feeling, Ranjan felt bad saying thus...

A very uneasy silence filled the room. As if to end it somewhere some trouble occurred in the electric wires - the light went off. In the darkened room father did not know about it. Sonti-ba's baby started crying in her lap. Brother-in-law bumped into and sent the bell metal betel-nut stand crashing to the floor with a loud clanging.

'This light is a trouble' Sonti-ba said with irritation.

'Yes, it creates trouble from time to time.' Bou said.

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Bimala brought in a lighted lamp.

'Why does it happen?' Brother-in-law asked Ranjan.

'The stream of electron gets stopped.' Ranjan tried to complicate the matter.

'Yeah, I get it perfectly,' brother-in-law quipped.

'Let your electron go to hell,' Nikhil said.

'Would understand if you can mend the light'; Sontiba said, 'What have you studied?'

'Theoretical Physics'. Nikhil quipped sarcastically.

'My theory is much better than your practice.'

Both brother-in-law and Sontiba suspected something at the tone of the voice. What was Nikhil's practice? They looked at each other.

'Talk of sending electrons to hell; suits you only, you have gone to hell anyway.'

'What's the matter, what has happened? Sonitiba became eager. Bou was clever, she did not show any interest.

'It's nothing, nothing,' Ranjan tried to change the topic in haste, 'who hasn't gone to hell?' Yes, who hasn't gone to hell, Sontiba thought, Anima came today, her old college friend Anima Mazumdar. Now she sings in radio too, works as professor of Botany. What a 'cynical' one she has become. Still unmarried. The old simplicity had greatly disappeared. The enthusiasm, emotion and excitability of yesteryears seemed to have vanished. Meeting a class friend after a long time brought such joy to her, she thought she would for some time leave the world of feeding bottle and oil cloth and go back to the old days. But...

Jati Babu wanted to take leave. He had to enquire about Karuna Babu. His asthma bouts had increased again.

'Sit for some time more,' Bou said.

Jati Babu was not liking it much. Ila Nila had fallen asleep in the corner bed. Looking at them he started thinking something silently. Brother-in-law became busy with the newspaper. Somebody was writing about jet propelled fighter planes used in the Korean War. What is jet propulsion? He wanted to ask Ranjan, but he kept silent. Today father also asked about it at noon, but he couldn't say. Making brother-in-law sit near him father had read the newspaper at noon time. And brother-in-law understood that father was of the firm opinion - that after Gandhiji's death the Congress was going to the dogs. He was also not happy with the UNO's role in Kashmir and Korea. It was becoming clear day by day that the general assembly was under control of America. Why don't the Americans leave Korea? The people there would be able to settle their troubles themselves. Brother-in-law had said, the far eastern people had a great hatred for the whites from long before. A customs superintendent who has seen many of their countries had told a tale about an incident in a Japanese harbour, he told it to father today... the conversation went on well for some time, but the old man suddenly felt that brother-in-law was

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not happy talking to him. His face filled with a petulance... like a small boy, realised that his historical necessity had possibly ended, Dismissed brother-in-law on the plea of a little sleep. Brother-in-law was relieved, but he felt it a little deep inside him also, a thorn started pricking inside his mind.

'No, I better get up, have to go to enquire about Karuna Babu once. It's necessary to enquire about Nabin's mother too.'

Jati Babu became busy to leave.

'What is Nabin doing nowadays?' Sonti-ba asked.

'He... the rascal, the spy... he has become an informer,' brother-in-law suddenly exploded, 'Today he gave toffees to Neela, asked, had Kon come to meet his sister? Thank God he had not come. I did not understand at first, afterwards only I realised. His mother is at death bed at home, what are these he's doing.'

'What can he do, the poor fellow, they are in such a poor state, and on top of that the mother is in this bad condition...'

As if Nikhil tried to plead for Nabin, 'Economic hardship is such a compromising situation...'

Jati Babu said, 'Capitalism ruins people by these ways. Just think, Nabin is a boy of the neighbourhood, your friend for such a long time, a known person -'

Suddenly Jati Babu stopped in hesitation. He felt himself to be a very shameless fellow.

Why these things involving the little girl?' Sontiba cursed Nabin to her hearts content, Bou also said a few words in anger. This kind of machinations with a small girl - Nikhil was mortified. Jati Babu once spoke of personal freedom and its lack in India - he remembered it. A small body is born in our world, meant a new human offspring came to our planet. Just think, what would be the amount of bitterness through which it would grow up. Some demons had made the planet a captive one - their preying malevolent gaze penetrates everywhere. The child would grow up in this beautiful world suspicious of his own shadow, and everywhere the black shadows of suspicion and doubt..., distrust and hatred would fall.

Would the shadows of doubt and hatred fall on? Ila and Neela's beautiful innocent faces too...

Jati Babu went away. He was feeling unhappy. Who had explained to a man like Ranjan the concept of 'partisan warfare'? Does Ranjan read or understand Lenin? His gaze went towards the darkened room of father. A victim of bourgeois propaganda - the old man was fast asleep. Discontent against the new generation laid pent up inside his mind, but what had the present social system given him? Yet, this simple honest old soul, this older generation, who was responsible for not getting them as a valuable alley? Who watched with indifference their slide into the mire of a bad propaganda machine? But where was the opportunity for the leftist to disseminate their message? The fascist government did not give any

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opportunity. Kon and their friends say a single action, a single confrontation is more effective than tons and tons of leaflets. But Kon belonged to an opponent party. In the whirlpool of political superstition. Jati Babu's thought became more and more complex...

Conflict releases thoughts - 'Action releases thought from its blind alleys and vicious circles ...' they say. Still terrorism is a hated thing. Action — does action mean terrorism?'

Brother-in-law walking by his side, said. 'Our people always have borne the brunt, Kon and his friends say now is the time to show that the people can also hit back. Blood for blood policy. It has became necessary to break the laziness and inertia of the people.'

'Bank has been looted, granary has been looted, has the people's inertia gone away by these acts?'

Nikhil was trying to get at the root of the matter from all these complexities. He suddenly remembered Goethe - Surprising everybody, he suddenly shouted out,

'In the beginning was the act.'

Ranjan was surprised the most. The reaction of Nikhil's doings with Bluebell had not disappeared from his mind. The talks of Bou, Nikhils father, brother-in-law, Sontiba and Nabin had caused his head to reel. Felt as if everybody's sanity had disappeared, he was getting entangled unwillingly in everybody's every kind of affair. Strange talks were emanating from strange mouths. Why do banks fail, he was also compelled to hear all about it from Jati Babu. The matters of Dhan, Kon and Anima, and Makhoni created confusion in his thought. Unstability, decay and uncertainty. The sun's dying, Nikhil's father is dying. The fluids evaporate out of the saucepan full of milk, alpha particles are emitted from radium every moment, restless electrons scatter through the radio valve grids. Nothing has any certainty anywhere, from particles to wave and right after that particles from waves; a state of anarchy apparent everywhere... people are rebellious, restless, disobedient of laws, the electric particles have broken the law by refusing to follow the potential furrier, Dirac had broken the laws of mathematics with his delta function...

'Ranjan, aren't you going home? The night has gone far?'

'Shall leave in a little while, what shall I do going home?'

'How are you studies? The exam...'

'Going on to an extent, want to leave this place soon, don't feel alright at all here.'

Sontiba smiled, indicating sympathy.

'Have decided to go early, leaving day after tomorrow.'

'Day after tomorrow? Won't you see Anima's musical function? Ila and Neela would dance in it, they are requesting very much. Anima has become very proficient in playing the sitar-'.

'Oh, my sewing - I have lots to do to complete it.' Bou remembered that Anima

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had given her to sew two colourful chaddors for Ila, Neela's dance. 'Sonti, the chaddors must be done today, don't you go to sleep.'

'When they grow up I will enrol them in Udayshankar's troupe,' brother-in-law said with some pride. Sonti also felt some pride, Bou smiled once. 'Everybody say, they dance very beautifully at such a tender age.'

Nikhil wanted to see Ila, Neela's much admired dance, but thinking about the environment of glaringly bright lights of the musical function he shrank. Two soft faced girls would dance, Anima would play the sitar in unison, people would enjoy, would smile. In the bright light the smiling men and women, Bou and Sonti-ba, Ila, and Neela would appear as romantic. And to the rhythm of music Jati Babu would give his unbearable comments, Girija Sharma would be seeking opportunities with a lustful gaze in his eyes, and possibly, like an uncultured boor, Ranjan would try to explain the music as a sum of Fourier waves. Girls with their budding bosoms would move around nearby, he himself would get excited, possibly 'demonic' thought would cross his mind. Khogen Das was sponsoring the musical function, how would the atmosphere be affected by his pushed out chest and slight smile?

'Is the function on the day of 'Janmastami'? Bou was trying to count out the days. Bou would not be able to spend much time there, lots of work would remain to be done at home, she would have to leave early. Tunes of some chants would possibly play indistinctly inside her mind; alone with the baby in the empty house, her mind would repeatedly fly off to the light and laughter of the musical function.

(That's what exactly happened, Bou felt bad, Nikhil too. somebody possibly sang - 'Hail storms raged tonight...')

'Feeling very hot, the heat from the lamp is too much,' Bou said.

Ranjan said, 'Wastage. The lamp is burning too much.' Bou turned down the flame.

Waiting for sometime he said, 'Wastage is the main thing; only two per cent of the amount of energy that is released by burning oil, is used by us for our sight, reading and writing. The rest is wasted, means the rest is not utilised by us. You can see, how much heat is being generated?'

'What is science doing about it?' Brother-in-law asked.

'They are trying to invent light without heat. I am thinking, that this great wastage of energy, how to stop it, or to convert it again to light to bring illumination to the needed areas. Theoretically, its possible. Because any kind of energy — light, heat, electricity, magnetism, sound — is transformable to another. Just think, if I can do that — with what bright light the whole world would fill up!'

'Utopian,' Nikhil said. Realised after saying - it was not appropriate.

Bou smiled. Sonita-ba did not pay any attention to this boyish talk. Brother-in-law showed some interest, but the net result was that Ranjan felt let down. Ranjan remembered Jati Babu, he surely would have said - Scientists today cannot invent anything and use it for the welfare of the people. Capitalism has turned the scientist

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into slaves of capital. The capitalists have their authority over everything from razor blade to atom bomb. Suppose you are able to present the world with hundred thousand lumens of light, but who would allow you to use them in this world?

Ranjan left with an irritation born out of failure to find a reason. Bou's dinner was nearly ready, Moina and others would shortly go for dinner; better to leave before he was asked to join in. Sonti-ba slowly went to sleep in the chair, brother-in-law yawned a long yawn, Nikhil went out. Coming in Bou saw that Sonti had fallen asleep, the baby's milk was lying in the bottle unfed, a silence of an uninhabited house — not a single word, not a single sound, the wind came in, the curtains fluttered. Bou's gaze softened, taking Sonti's baby in her lap, she started feeding it...

Several days later, when he awoke from sleep in the morning, he was surprised, Sonti-ba's soft hand was caressing his face. Why were the radios silent today, he became still more surprised. When he got out he saw Ranjan and brother-in-law sitting at the breakfast table and laughing, Bou was laughing, Sonti-ba was laughing. Ranjan pointed - Girija Sharma was going with the radio of the mess loaded, in a cycle rickshaw. A contraption like a calling bell fitted to the plug of the fan emitted grating sounds.

'Taking it to the repair shop, Ranjan said smiling. 'I want to see the expression on the face of the people of the radio repair shop. They won't be able to repair it, there is nothing wrong with the radio. The trouble is here. I have fitted this buzzer, do you see it. Its grating sound is creating trouble in their radio. The poor fellows have not understood it.'

'The things you do!'

'Serves them right. Have caught them scientifically. The children of our neighbourhood cannot study in peace due to their radio-playing.'

What was a buzzer, how did it act, Nikhil did not feel the urge to understand, he joined in the laughter.

'If there time for the tea to be ready? Let me finish shaving.'

Ranjan sat down with brother-in-law's razor set to shave.

'My shaving set has already been nationalised or what?'

'Jati Babu was just entering, the pun did not touch him. He laughed loudly.

'What's this sound?' he asked.

'Rehearsel for the cultural function. Orchestra for Ila and Neela's dance.' Sonti-ba said beaming, 'Anima took them out in the morning.'

The sound of the orchestra came from the nearby house. This was the second cultural function. In the first Ila and Neela had met with unprecedented success.

Nalini doctor came in. Tea was forgotten. Everybody went to father's room. The column of mercury in doctor's blood pressure measuring instrument rapidly went up.

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Everybody's face reflected concern and fear. Nalini Doctor, reassured, said, 'you take complete rest. So many people are there in the house.' A few coughs escaped from the old man's throat.

'Yes, I need rest.' He happened to glance towards Bou. He thought something.

Nalini doctor went away. Everybody went out, the old man called back Moina. 'Daughter-in-law also needs rest. How she will keep on toiling the whole day with so many children? You go to Nalini once, he will give some tonic.' Bou suddenly cried outside the door unseen by others. In the other room Sonti-ba mumbled, 'Father is so simple, 'what he sees from outside he takes it to be true...'

The brilliant atmosphere of some time back did not remain so totally. Already a black shadow had been cast on it. People again sat at the tea table. Bou went in to the kitchen. Ranjan suddenly leapt up. Runu was trying to climb the steps. He was unable to lift one of his legs to the high step, repeatedly he failed. Ranjan reached him, observed him for a moment. Runu appeared to be on the verge of giving up his efforts. As if Nikhil awoke from sleep anew, he also leapt up. He gave Runu a leg up.

Climbing up became easy now. Runu rapidly climbed up the steps one after another-one step, two step — ultimately he stepped into the top rung.

The sound of the orchestra in the neighbour's house reached its cresendo. Bou and Sonti-ba came out of the kitchen. Bou's eyes still had the stain of wiped tears, Nikhil observed it. He looked at Runu whom he had pushed up to success, heard his victor's laughter, heard the climax of the orchestra. He brought out a smile onto his face - from the recesses of his heart, caught Ranjan by hand, dragged him to the table and made him sit down. He wanted to say something to Bou and Sonti-ba.

'Give us this day our daily bread,' he said. ❑

(Translation of the story Ashanta Electron - Saurav Kumar Chaliha)

Translated by Dr. D.J. Borah

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Apurba Sarma

night at baghe tapu

To the south of *Baghe Tapu*, the riverine island, flows the main river. And to the south of that is the *resap*, the reserved forest. No one calls it the resap any more, for nowadays it's known as *sansury*, that is, the sanctuary. Much of it has now been cleared with criss-crossing paths appearing everywhere. Tracts of cane and tall grass have been denuded, timber merchants and poachers have crushed and stripped off almost everything. In the past, he had gone to the forest drawn by its magnetic, inscrutable, imperious call. Although it now seems difficult to understand that, yet back then, just to be asked was enough. There was always a strange fascination, a heady enchantment in going. And he went with the fishermen, the deer-hunters and the grass-cutters in their boats. Starting at the river's edge itself, as one went ashore, was the endlessly dense underwood. It was almost impossible to spot the narrow overgrown pathways. Avoiding the clumps of thorny cane and stinging nettles, bending, crouching, and at places crawling on hands and knees, they penetrated with quiet painful toll. And then there was the holding on to the branches and clambering up the trees, the hiding and waiting among the leaves while putting up stoically with the bites of ants, mosquitoes and fleas. There was the straining to sniff out the prowling tiger or the rhino so as to let them go their ways. Finally, after the forest guards had completed their rounds to return to their camps, there they were, scrambling down and plunging into the lake with fishing nets, or shooting a deer coming to the water's edges to drink, and then two of them, pulling and tugging it into the boat and rowing away in a hurry. In all these activities there had been a keen sense of mystery, an intoxicating excitement. The fearfully trembling body, the nervously throbbing heart, the fear and the bravado, the doubt and the courage – all these sensations fused to draw him irresistibly to the forest, time and again. But now one does not go on these nocturnal huntings, for there is neither the time nor the opportunity. And it is not as enjoyable as before. Now hardly anyone goes there merely to catch fish or to shoot a deer; the hunters nowadays are after the rhinos that fetch lakhs of rupees. These new adventures are different from those of the past, and they now involve the horrors of men shooting men. Earlier the hunts were for excitement, now they are for greed. And indeed for many years he had not been to the south bank at all. Now, only with a deepening haze about it, the mystery of the south bank comes back to haunt him.

Baghe, for a river island, is fairly extensive in length and breadth. During the monsoons, when the river rises, the banks are eroded here and there, but *Baghe* is never submerged. When the river rises, men and their herds of buffaloes living on the other smaller islands like *Thote* and *Lokhe* would move to the comparative safety of *Baghe*. Sometimes during the floods even one or two deer or tigers from the sanctuary swim across to *Baghe* and stay for a while before returning to the

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forest. At times, a tiger or two stay back in *Baghe* and disturb the peace of the island. And indeed, after the rains of the last few days, the river has been rising, becoming wide and full. It is now submerging the high land formed by itself here and there. But on this side of *Baghe* the river is still shallow, for silt and sediment had been gathering there, raising alluvial land. At places gushes of water dash against the banks, breaking up the soil.

At first the muddy waters carry all kinds of rubbish – dried leaves and grasses, bits and pieces of wood and bamboo, half-burnt fire-wood and hay, charcoal and cowdung. An old familiar smell seems to be wafting down anew. After some days, with the river in full spate, its fury would increase. Large whirlpools would twirl menacingly, spiralling currents would roar up to the surface churning fast and furious, and in the dark the river would make strange nocturnal sounds. Mermaids would laugh loud and shrill, and the water-gods would roar, fall silent, and roar again. *Baghe,* with its edges loosened by the river, would rest motionless on the surface of the water. A strange fascination shrouded it, and there shot through it a vague anxiety, a strain of fear. Yet the island tenaciously clung to life, yearned to survive. In the midst of all these, it passed each day, and awaited the next. Such was *Baghe's* life.



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After the first long spell of the rains the sky now is bright and clear. The peaks of the distant hills in the north and the forest in the south appear a deep smoky blue. The dry and dusty island of *Baghe* is turning a vibrant green. Some parts of the open sandy stretches are covered by a thin growth of new grass. Here and there small straggly shrubs are shooting up. The limp *jhao* trees are standing firm and upright and growing thick with new leaves. At one place a clump of tall thatching grass spreads itself out and soon overruns and blocks the pathways. Elsewhere the tough hay-like grass also grows swiftly and spreads luxuriantly.

The island world that changes its appearance from time to time has adopted him for its own. He loves this vast river with its meandering tributaries and alluvial flood plains. Though he seems to lose himself in its depths, yet inwardly he is sometimes afraid of it. Several tributaries flow into the river. Between them, to the left of the island, towards the north, are the flood plains, where the steadily increasing herd of buffaloes with their calves can be seen. This is his family; he has grown up with them and lived among them for the last ten or twelve years of his life. They have grown close to him, and among them he passes his days without worrying about his past or future. For his future is yet to impinge upon his consciousness as a presence, and his past, slowly slipping away, is becoming strange and unfamiliar even to himself.

Of the things that he had known in the ten or twelve years before coming here and of the people who were his own, nothing, no one, is now left. Everything is gone, lost, or perhaps it is he who has been lost to his own past. Bits and pieces of that past from which he was missing remain scattered; some raw white flesh here, some dried skin there, some sweat or some tears elsewhere. He would never be able to get them back pieced into one whole. He is now hedged in by tall thorny cane stalks and the way back to his past is lost to him forever.

First, he had lost his father, or the man he had called father. Till today he has not

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indeed been able to define what his father had meant to him. The image that came to his mind was that of a thin, faceless man, aloof, taciturn and irritable. He remembers the open wounds on the man's calves with the pale white flesh showing; perhaps the wounds were from the beatings that he received, wounds that never healed because they were never treated. He remembers too the blackened dead nails on the fingers; it was rumoured that if the police couldn't make you confess, they stuck needles under your nails. For the man was a thief, stubborn and thick-skinned. His name was Sirokali, and in his profession he had achieved such a degree of notoriety that among the villagers his very name had become a byword for stealing – 'You know, so and so's cow was *sirokalied* last night' – they would say. As a consequence, whenever any incident of theft was reported, two constables came on bicycles to pick him up and take him to the thana. After a couple of days, half-dead, bruised, and aching all over, he would return home. There he would lie on his bed in the dark main house or weed the little plot at the back and tend the vegetables. Then, to ward off the evil eye he would draw with lime a face upon a broken earthen pot or would advertise to scheming fellow thieves his willingness to join them, with the words 'No objection!'

In the evening he would sit alone toasting his opium in an earthen pan. But no one knew where he would disappear every night. At the end of it all, though, the man died of typhoid. He still remembers the body lying in the courtyard like a bundle covered with a coarse soiled cloth. Sometimes he feels as though he could see his mother-- an elusive, shadowy figure. Though he remembers her face it is now getting a little frayed and blurred around the edges. He remembers how she used to wash his hair with the *outenga's* soft pulp and scrub his back. At night they slept on the same bamboo cot, and though Punimai, his sister, slept in the middle, his mother always held him. For a long time she would gently stroke his head and back, thinking him to be asleep.

Before completing the fourth standard, he had to leave school. One day, a corner broke off from his lathless slate, and then, unable to get the special brand of paper from Serampore for his geography and arithmetic notebooks, he was caned by the teacher, Maneshwar Pandit. He stopped going to school, for who would knowingly go to receive punishment? Soon after, early one morning, his mother bathed him, oiled and combed his hair and gave him his one and only shirt to wear. Then she took him to Mohudar *Sonari's* (goldsmith's) house, and left him there to look after the goldsmith's cows. Before leaving him she stroked his head and shoulders as she did every night. As he slept on a jute sack spread on the mud floor of *Sonari's* house that night, he felt as though he, in his loneliness, was beginning to lose his mother.

Now a *Sonari* only in name, Mohudar had indeed been a goldsmith, but had left the profession to own substantial land and property and was now a prosperous, respectable farmer. He retained most of his holdings and employed labourers to work on them, but the rest he let out on a sharecropping basis. In the village there was hardly any work for a goldsmith and the earnings were rather meagre, while the notoriety was great. Rumour had it that goldsmiths would not hesitate to cheat even their own mothers of the gold on their earlobes. Therefore, turning his back on the profession and its attendant slander, *Sonari* turned to mortgaging and

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money-lending. But the name stuck, and he, not wanting to cut himself off completely from the occupation of his forefathers, brought a distant relative and set up a goldsmith's shop for him in one corner of the village centre. He, however, gave up making ornaments. But his private business went on and flourished. His family increased as did his property. His house was rebuilt, with wooden beams, shutters and a corrugated tin roof. Employing two or three ploughmen, he settled down to cultivate his land. Further, he had, at his own cost, a well, set with concrete rings, dug for the village school, and also donated two bundles of tin for the pinnacle on the roof of the *naamghar*. Finally he acquired land and set up stalls for his herd of buffaloes at *Baghe* and employed a Nepali, to look after them.

And one day he, Adhan, left Mohudar's cows and came to work with the Nepali, Saila, on the river island of *Baghe*.

The strange unfamiliar world of *Baghe Tapu* in the middle of the river has now imprisoned him, has removed him far from his familiar past. The river without beginning or end is full of indecipherable mysteries and he is unable to fathom the tenuous yet intimate bonds between it and the queer land of *Baghe*. Trying to come close he feels he is being driven farther away, and deeply attracted though he is, he feels that the river holds him at arm's length, almost slighting him as it were. With Saila he tended the grazing buffaloes, took them down to the river and bathed them, and cut grass for them. In the evening he would smoke the cattle sheds to keep them free from mosquitoes, and in the morning sweep and clean them out. And after Saila had milked the buffaloes, he would help the milkman collect the cans and load them in his boat. All this work was not the least painful or boring for him. Sometimes, feeling suddenly happy for no apparent reason he would try to play Saila's flute or would swim long distances in the river. Then, without warning, on some days he would become cheerless and sad. Sometimes, by boat, he would go very far upstream with Saila and there, in the middle of the river, he would feel lonely and abandoned. It seemed to him that the river wanted to gather him to itself, and he was afraid. The next moment, inexplicably, he wanted to give himself up to its embrace. Saila would pull up the boat where other Nepalis lived with their cattle. There they would eat curd from small bowls made of jackfruit leaves, or have *sira* with molasses and black tea. And thus he would once again return to the world of men. After a long period had passed in this manner he was able, once to go home for half day in the Milkman's boat. He spent some time with his mother and sister and with raised spirits he rowed the boat back to *Baghe*. Imperceptibly, *Baghe Tapu* endeared itself to him.

Two years had passed when one day he received, with a jolt, some totally unexpected news. What he heard was confirmed, yet it left many questions unanswered in his mind. Not quite comprehending what had happened he would sit silent and speechless. A searing and painful sense of bereavement overcame him. He felt he had lost, irrecoverably, something that had meant a great deal to him, and was now reduced to a pauper; for his mother along with his sister Punimai, had gone off with a carpenter from Barpeta, and nobody knew where they were. He could recall the man, in a vest and khaki half-pants, with a pencil stub stuck over his ear. The man had worked in a house, close to theirs, just across the road, and there he had made benches, chairs, small tables and low stools. The carpenter carried out

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his work on the verandah and Adhan with his friends crowded around, watching him saw the wood and plane the pieces. To him the man had seemed like some kind of a demon, an *asura*. He had seen *asuras* in Durga images and also in the theatre. One thing however that now made him feel happy was that *asuras* were always killed. Every once in a while his heart swelled up like the river during the monsoon and at other times it shrank and shrivelled like a dried up tributary. Anger and hurt pride and the pain of defeat and rejection stormed and buffeted his young heart. He felt forlorn, lost to himself, and cut adrift from his past. His memories became vague, and forgetfulness sprouting wildly, seemed to barricade the ways into his own past. The sometimes dry, sometimes slushy path ways of the villages, the trees, rivers, and rice fields, the games they had played under the peepul at the *tiniali,* hot afternoons spent fishing for *sengeli,* the small fish, after clearing the marshy plants in the 'witch's pond', the sweet taste of sugarcane and pineapples stolen from someone's garden while grazing the cows – through these experiences the bonds with the village that were once so firm and robust had now become bleak and fragile. A veil of darkness was falling over these memories and in it only a few hazy faces remained – expressionless, lifeless and wooden. On the spent fire of his childhood there was left only a pile of ashes with no bones to be witness to what had once been there.

He was drawn closer to the vast river. For it, there was always present in him some powerful attraction and an indefinable fear. Day and night, during the monsoons and in the dry spells, he had seen so many forms, so many aspects of the river. In the rainy season the torrents of swiftly surging muddy waters were unrestrained and uncontrolled, while in winter the river became placid, green and lazy. In summer he would watch with wonder and delight the silvery sparkle of the undulating waters in the afternoon sun. During the day the river frolicked and gambolled with him; softly and lovingly it folded him in its warm embrace. Then, gently, it would let him go and playfully caress his body. His nights were filled with the indistinct murmurs of the river as it flowed in the silence of the vicinity. Time passed, leaving many questions unanswered and many answers unspoken and vague. He would, of course, learn a lot, understand a great deal more, and become clear about many things; and for himself he would create a whole new world. And once again on a dense, dark summer night, with the torrential rains pouring down, the turbulent river would roar drunkenly, filling him with a great dread. All feelings rush in here in their extremity. Then, with great suddenness the day breaks, and within a few moments all is awash in daylight. There is a certain cruelty in the vividness of the afternoon sun and in the sharp clarity of a winter night. It seems to demand an absolute, helpless surrender. And he with bent knees and bowed head surrenders himself to these powerful forces of nature.

Sometimes he wonders with amazement where all the endlessly flowing waters of the river keep going. He had heard about the sea, but what happens after the river flows into the sea? As the waters retreat, the river's strength is diminished and the landscape turns empty and barren. The tributaries shrink and he is able to cross them easily with his herd and take them grazing in some distant alluvial plain. But the river's attractions, its endless mystery, his inexpressible sense of kinship and attachment with it are as absorbing as ever. Perhaps the fear lessens a bit, but it does not totally disappear, and somewhere within him it remains. Then, one day,

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again the river comes into fullness and is swollen. He is aware of the passage of time. He feels the changes taking place in his mind, his body and in his very outlook. He grows into a young man. The changes taking place in the world outside touch the lonely world that he had created for himself and inhabited for so long. Slowly, imperceptibly, the two become one. The world inside quivers awhile, is quickened, and then becomes still and steady once again.

At some distance away from them, Chabilal had set up sheds for his cattle. They were mainly cows with only two buffaloes. With him were his wife and two children, and that was his world. Saila would occasionally take him to Chabilal's place, but he felt clumsy and ill-at-ease among people. Chabilal's wife asked him questions to which he had no answers, but as she served them *sira* and molasses, warm and delicious toasted maize, sugar cane and other things, his awkwardness began to give way to a more relaxed and easy relationship with her. He started calling her 'Naani' and subconsciously compared her with his mother. Naani was more beautiful than the image of his mother in his memory. Her face was bright, affectionate, healthy and rounded, and he became aware of the beauty of women and of their images in the mind. He felt deeply attracted to her. Sometimes he became restless wanting to see her, to talk to her, or simply to be near her. Naani's love and affection slowly drew him out from that narrow, confined world in which he had so long lived. One day he left his herd, and with his sunburnt body he came running to her to ask her for water to quench his thirst. As her glance, loving, concerned, slid over him, he became, once more, the long-forgotten 'he' that he had been ages ago.

Baghe Tapu is not a regular haunt of tigers. But once in a while a tiger or two would swim across from the southern sanctuary and make attempts to snatch a cow or a buffalo. The smell of the tiger would immediately set the bells on the panic-stricken buffaloes' necks ringing while they bellowed in terror and stepped around frantically. Then Saila, beating a tin and shouting at the top of his voice would come running to the stockade and lighting the bundle of sticks kept ready for the purpose, he would give chase and the tiger invariably disappeared. They would be alert for a couple of days and keep a fire burning at night by the stockade. After a few abortive attempts the tiger usually gave up and went away. Perhaps on the realisation of an uncertain future and possible death, it sneaked away either to the forest near the villages of the north or to the safe haven of the sanctuary in the south. But that time a stupid, stubborn tiger had troubled them for almost a whole month. Having caused them a great deal of anxiety, it seemed to have finally disappeared one day. Actually, however, it had only changed its tactics. One afternoon Saila had left the herd grazing and gone for some tea at Chabilal's place, when a heifer moved away from the herd and entered a thicket of tall grass. At once the tiger, lying in wait, pounced from behind and snapped her neck. She fell to the ground without a sound and the tiger dragged her further into the thick grass.

In the evening, when they didn't see the heifer, they called her loudly and searched for her in the nearby forest, but in vain. The next day they saw the crows gathering and discovered the half-eaten carcass in the forest. On being informed of the incident, Mohudar *Sonari* came at once with his gun and with men and all the necessary paraphernalia; for if the tiger, who had now tasted blood, was not killed

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at once, it would be a threat and a source of constant vexation. A high platform was built and *Sonari* spent the night there. Nothing happened! On the second night, as the tiger came to claim the carcass, it was shot dead.

The very next day Saila was dismissed and all the work was entrusted to Adhan. Of late the milk from Sonari's herd had been greatly reduced. A number of the buffaloes were growing old, and with others taking up the same business, herds had increased on the island, so much so that grass was getting scarce. Moreover, ever since Chabilal had come to *Baghe*, Sönari regarded Saila with some suspicion. Being unhappy about the steadily dwindling supply of milk from his herd and holding Saila entirely responsible for the loss of the heifer, Sonari got rid of him without much ado. Besides, he, Adhan, was now a strong young man, and capable of looking after the cattle on his own.

The unexpected and abrupt end to their relationship of almost twelve years left Adhan unsettled and unhappy. In their isolated lives enclosed by the river. It was a practical relationship bound and shaped by routines of work. Although Saila could never enter his solitary friendless innermost existence, yet now his departure left Adhan a lonely man in *Baghe's* wilderness. His work increased, and he was unable to leave the herd even for a moment. He felt cruelly deprived of Naani's love and her affectionate concern. Sometimes he managed to take the whole herd grazing near Chabilal's stockade. Then he would run over calling out loudly to Naani, drink a bowl of water that she gave him, and would leave soon after.

Normally Khemraj, the milkman, came by boat early every morning. He would collect milk from all the stockades in the neighbouring area, load the cans in his boat, and row across to the *ghat* on the north bank. There he would supply milk to the smaller dealers who went from house to house, and to the tea-shops along the river bank. Some of the milk he would send by the ferry to the south bank. While there was a good demand among the sweet shops there, yet after meeting all expenses, he did not really make much profit.

Nowadays, however, Khemraj does not come himself to collect the milk. His business affairs are flourishing, for now, he, in addition to supplying milk, operates gambling dens. He had put up a corrugated tin roof over his house, is the proud owner of a brand-new green Raleigh bicycle, and moves around with an eye on a membership of the Panchayat. From petty-trader he has promoted himself to a *mahajan* and befitting his new status he employs a young lad named Hoormal, from an interior village, to collect and distribute milk. Earlier, Hoormal had been employed to wash cups and glasses at a tea-shop on the *ghat*. When he became a young man he began supplying milk to families in the villages along the river bank. That was how his association with Khemraj started. But Hoormal's independent enterprise soon ran into rough weather and before long his little undertaking folded. Since he was deeply in debt to Khemraj, the latter stopped giving him milk and employed him on daily wages to carry milk to the south bank. As this venture became profitable, Khemraj being a shrewd businessman, handed it over to a relative, and put Hoormal in charge of collecting milk from the scattered stockades in *Baghe*.

From Hoormal he heard little snippets of news from the old world he had left

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behind. But that now is a strange world, and such news failed to give him any pleasure or even rouse any spark of curiosity. The dreams and realities of his childhood were all associated with his mother and with her desertion of him his dreams had died and his small childhood world had become cold, dark and cheerless. There were no illusions, no mysteries any more. Reality for him was now the varied world of the island; his constant companions the river and the buffalo herd, Chabilal and Naani, the milk traders and the Bihari fishermen in their boats going upstream to fish in some creek or stream - and from this point in time he had no desire to look back to his severed past. Beyond this seemingly tangible present, he appeared to have no conscious awareness of a different future either. Unexpectedly, even reluctantly, as his mind sometimes wandered down memory lane, he found himself thinking of his father, the man whose relationship with him had, at best, been frail and distant, and whose face was now just a blur in his memory. Notorious thief, opium-addict, hard-hearted and friendless - he was all these and more. Police torture, long and frequent jail terms, the ever present and dangerous uncertainties every night of his chosen way of life, by day the object of barbs and taunts- his father had knowingly brought them upon his own head. This though lodged itself in his mind, and like a festering thorn that could not be drawn or forgotten, was a source of constant vexation. And then, as he almost at once remembered how he had always been partial to his mother and believed himself safe in her shadow - then his mind clouded over and he felt suffocated.

One day Hoormal gave him a bit of odd news. 'Have you heard about your Mahajan?', he began. 'They say his sister-in-law has the pot!'

Puzzling out the riddle he realized that Beli, the motherless young sister-in-law of Mohudar Sonari had been deflowered and that she was now three months pregnant. Adhan was embarrassed by such news, but Hoormal had no shame or inhibitions in discussing the matter. He further informed Adhan salaciously that *Sonari's* father-in-law had called a meeting of the villagers at the *Naamghar* to find out the truth. Laughing uncontrollably, Hoormal described how in that meeting six names of probable culprits had come up one by one, and Beli herself had named them all. From callow village lads to brawny young men and fatherly figures, no name was spared. Which among them would be held accountable? The meeting broke up in an uproar, an angry commotion. At the end of it, Mohudar *Sonari* took the poor girl home with him to be placed in her sister's care.

Adhan was unusually diverted and amused by Hoormal's story - but he also felt rather bashful. Curiously, he was sorry for this young sister-in-law of Mohudar *Sonari* whom he had never seen. It was as though there were points of likeness between her situation and his. He too had had his face blackened by shame and scandal and he too had found himself shunned and slighted by one and all.

A couple of months later a boat laden with bamboos brought *Sonari* to the island along with two labourers. At some distance away from the stockade and Adhan's hut they started work on a small house. Straw was bought from another island nearby and in just three days the little house was ready. A few days after that, one dark evening, a boat came again, loaded with bedding, utensils and other household goods. In it were also Beli and a young maid servant. Sonari saw them into the house and left them. Before going, he called Adhan near the boat and said, 'Perhaps

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you know that the girl has brought shame upon herself and her family. My father-in-law is all alone and in the village these things are very distressing. She'll remain here for the time being. Once this messy business is over and forgotten, I'll send her home. Keep an eye on them while they're here. I'll be coming now and then'.

Adhan was unable to say anything in answer. *Sonari* stepped into the boat and left without another word.

The next day Hoormal came. 'The vulture's only waiting for the cow to die. You understand, don't you?' He remarked enigmatically 'Once that happens it'll start pulling the carcass. Just wait and watch!' He spoke in riddles, and while Adhan was not quite sure about what he meant, he had an uneasy sense of foreboding about the matter.

His initial reservations about the girl slowly broke down and his manner gradually became less constrained, more relaxed. Beli busy with household chores, moved in and out of her house seemingly without any awkwardness. But he still could not bring himself to talk to her easily, naturally. Hoormal, however, was without any inhibitions. It was he with his simple, talkative, unaffected manner who brought about a measure of normality to the situation by talking to Beli freely. *Sonari's* regular trips, Beli's tense, hopeless expectation, signified the beginning of a different sort of life at *Baghe Tapu.* Only Hoormal's noisy natural behaviour made them act as though nothing was amiss. But deep in Adhan's heart was still a troublesome restlessness.

Then one day, Hoormal, on his trip back from *Baghe*, carried an urgent message from Beli. By evening *Sonari* arrived with a woman. Adhan noticed a lot of activities at Beli's house - a fire was lit, water was heated. As night fell, he heard Beli's long drawn-out groans and high pitched screams, and found himself unable to sleep.

Once he walked over to the stockade, checked the sleeping animals, and ran his hands over a couple of them. Then he took a long walk along the river bank. Finally he came back home and sat silently on his cot. He seemed to be suspended between anticipation and uncertainty, and to be waiting almost fearfully for an end to this tense anxiety. He didn't know how late it was when he was awakened by the cry of a baby. Fully awake, and filled with excitement he walked outside and stood in the silent night. The island was shrouded in darkness and overhead a few stars twinkled; there was the sleeping herd and at a distance, the river flowed endlessly with an indistinct murmur. Suddenly the dark silence was pierced by a sharp strangulated cry which broke off as abruptly and unexpectedly as it had begun. Everything for a moment was eeriely still : the surrounding earth, the motion of the breeze and even the flowing river. He stood awhile, confused and agitated, then slowly walked into his hut with a heavy heart and fell on his cot.

Two days later he heard the horrifying truth from Hoormal. Hoormal had found it out by speaking to the midwife brought to assist at the birth. And by then the little body had no doubt been entirely devoured by the big fish in the river. His mind was numbed by what he had heard, and for a few days he moved as though in a daze. After the day's work was done, he spent his evenings, distraught and alone, in his dark hut. Beli was not to be seen outside at all. A few days passed, and then he went over to Chabilal's house, thinking that Naani's presence would soothe his

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mind. She too had heard the details from Hoormal, and could only click her tongue in distress.

'Can you believe', she began agitatedly 'that her own brother-in-law forced salt into the baby's mouth! Tsk, tsk, tsk! What kind of a man can that be. Is he a man or a beast?' Naani shook her head in disgust and disbelief. Adhan left.

Life slowly returned to normal. Here on the island things readily fall into an easy going perspective. Nature here is fierce and forceful and man a mere non-entity. The great river, the greater stretches of sand, the limitless sky and the endless flow of the water overwhelm everyone, everything, and man's smallness, meanness, poverty, sins and miseries are scattered and lie unnoticed.

Beli started coming out of the house. Early in the morning before anyone else was up she would go down to the river and bathe. She took charge of the cooking for all of them living there. *Sonari* came quite often, either in the morning or in the afternoon, but he always returned in the evening. Hoormal came, happy-go-lucky and boisterous as before. He would ask Beli for tea, collect and load the milk cans and then leave.

Before too long, however, Adhan noticed a subtle change in Hoormal's behaviour. He was less noisy, less talkative and while he looked thoughtful, as though worried about something, he still retained his smile. His voice lowered, he talked long and often with Beli and he would walk, unhesitatingly, into her house, looking for her. And even when he spoke to Adhan, he seemed distracted with his eyes intently searching for a glimpse of Beli.

One evening Hoormal came to Adhan's hut, saying that he had been visiting Chabilal and decided to drop in on him while passing by. A few days after that, at night, he heard Hoormal's voice outside in the dark. He said something about having come to check the milk accounts with Chabilal. And the next time he was there, he offered no explanation. That evening it was just turning dark when Adhan stepped out of his house only to see Hoormal coming out of Beli's house and walking towards him. He stood in the courtyard, disturbed and ill-at-ease. Coming upon him in the dark, Hoormal, startled, stopped short. Without being able to see each other's faces, they were both aware of the passing moments, Adhan felt alarmed.

'Friend!' Hoormal exclaimed jovially, trying to act natural. Adhan was stiff and unresponsive. Hoormal placed his hand on the other's shoulder. Adhan stood absolutely still and motionless.

'There's so much to say!' He began. 'One day I'll tell you everything'. Adhan remained silent. A heavy weight pressed down on his heart.

'Let me go now'. Through the darkness Hoormal walked towards the ghat.

His days were now full of turmoil and unrest. He dreaded to think of what might happen. One afternoon he heard *Sonari* loudly and angrily arguing with Beli. Before leaving in his boat he asked Adhan at the ghat, 'Sultan and the other fishermen tell me, there's a boat moored here every evening. Whose boat is it?'

Sultan and his friends were Bihari fishermen who fished in the creeks upstream and returned at night. Before Adhan could collect his wits and think of what to

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say, *Sonari* inquired knowingly 'Hoormal's?'

'Yes,' Adhan's voice was low. 'Sometimes he spends that evening with Chabilal,' he added, sounding uncertain.

'Bah! Spends the evening with his mother's husband, the uncle!' Sonari spat. 'Bastard! Dog! Can't he moor the boat at the ghat near Chabilal's house,' he exploded angrily. Adhan felt as though the harsh words were directed at him.

Sonari strode furiously to his boat and snatched the oar.

Adhan climbed up the steep bank and stood silently watching the river for a long while. It was twilight. The torrential monsoon rains had begun. The river was filling up and becoming turbulent. The sound of the swirling currents grew louder. Occasionally, the banks, being continuously lashed by the running waters, broke off at places and plopped into the river. He turned towards his hut; it was steeped in darkness. A thin shaft of light coming from Beli's house resisted the gloom. The river was rising, but there had as yet been no floods. Nor had he heard of any tiger being sighted anywhere. But, suddenly, the sharp, fetid smell of a tiger stung his nostrils, alarming him about the safety of the herd, and sending a chill down his spine. He shivered.

The next day as they were measuring out the morning's milk, he paused, and addressed Hoormal in a low faltering voice : 'Mahajan knows.'

'What?'

'That you row across every evening. He's furious.'

'Who cares?' Hoormal answered recklessly. 'By the end of this month I'll have some money and we'll run away. The old vulture will be left with his mouth open!'

'Where will you go? Home?'

'No. I'll tell you before we go, but you're not to tell anyone'

Adhan kept quiet. He didn't like any sort of unpleasantness and he felt uneasy that something dreadful was going to happen, for Hoormal was an intractable fellow. A presentiment of evil was already beginning to cloud his mind.

The day was cloudy, with a heavy pervasive stillness. From the evening a cool sharp wind began to blow over the river. This meant that the waters would rise further. Perhaps it would rain later in the night.

Ever since Saila had gone, his attempts at playing the flute had come to an end. A few days ago, however, Chabilal had given him a piece of *Bijulee* bamboo which would be just right for a flute. Having smoothened it and cut it to measure, he heated the curved end of his knife in the fire until it glowed and carefully cut out the round holes. He was happily engrossed in his work and had quite forgotten the lowering atmosphere outside. The flute seemed ready, and rubbing it clean with his palm, he lifted it to his lips to blow into it when suddenly he heard a shrill, terrified scream. Putting the flute down he ran outside when another sound, like the blood-curdling choking noises of a dying animal, reached his ears. At first he couldn't make out where the sound had come from. But the next moment he saw

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in the faint light the white-clad figure of Beli running down the bank to the river. He started to run after her but came back and took the machete stuck against the wall of his hut before following her again.

He had hardly gone a few yards when he saw Beli running back. He stopped. 'What happened', he shouted.

She suddenly stopped near him and helplessly clung to him. In a barely audible voice, choked with fear and horror she cried, 'They've killed him, they've killed him...'

With all his strength Adhan released himself from her clasp and started running again. Beli fell on the ground in a heap.

As he stood on the edge of the island he heard the loud and last slap of oars on the water. In the distance he saw the boat with the palm-leaf awning, that belonged to Sultan and the others, going rapidly downstream. He ran along the edge and then saw a solitary boat pulled up on the river bank. This, he knew, was the boat that Hoormal on occasions, had used. He looked all around him, but not seeing anything, ran back to his hut. Beli rose from the ground on seeing him, but he tersely said, 'There's nothing there,' and went straight inside.

Adhan pulled out the torch they used to chase tigers with, flashed it, and scrambled down to the river. He waded up and down in the shallow waters, training the flaming torch this way and that, but didn't see a thing. The river flowed, as it has been flowing from time immemorial. The water was rising. The ghat was quiet and the weather sullen. On the bank was the abandoned boat. Only the soft sound of the water lapping the boat broke the stillness of the night.

The following day a different man came to collect milk. He told Adhan that Hoormal had gone away without informing anyone and they hadn't been able to locate him. Adhan silently measured out the milk. The day passed like any other, as did the following days. He did not see Beli outside at all; only her maid servant was seen moving around and doing all the household work. Sonari came often and would step inside for just a few minutes. Then he would exchange a few words with Adhan, advise him on various matters and leave soon after. Adhan pulled the empty boat, along the sand, then used bamboos to push it further up the river bank, and secured it. He was convinced that Hoormal had stolen the boat from somewhere on the north bank.

One evening, about a month later, having settled the buffaloes for the night, he was walking back to his hut when a singular sight made him pause. At a distance, Beli, with her hair loosely flowing, stood at the edge of the steeply sloping river bank, gazing intently at the river. The sun, about to set, had turned red, and the water, vermillion-hued, glittered brightly. A blood red glow suffused the island. In the gleaming light the girl looked like an unearthly shadow, a disembodied spirit. He was alarmed and a shiver ran down his back. But an attraction that was almost spiritual drew him irresistibly towards her. She did not hear him approach and as he reached her he stopped and said, 'Beli'!

She was startled, but did not turn around, she merely pulled her *sador* tightly against herself.

'You mustn't stand here alone in the dark,' he gently chided. She stood motionless.

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He waited for a few minutes, then said more firmly, 'Come away!'

The sun had sunk completely, and the darkness crept slealthily in all directions. Beli slowly turned around and began walking back. He walked alongside. Suddenly she held her nose tightly with a corner of the *sador* and turned her face away. A peculiar sound burst out through her nose and she stopped. Not quite knowing what to do, he also stopped.

'Don't cry. Forget all that's happened', he said, trying to comfort her. Beli became calm and in the gathering dusk they both stood together as if incapable of moving forward.

'I tried to warn him, ' Adhan told her. For few seconds she did not speak and then seemed to struggle to prise open a secret door to her innermost thoughts. She spoke quietly. '*Bhinihi* wanted to keep me...'

He was shocked, and unable to respond, kept quiet, Hoormal's cryptic reference to the vulture and the cow came unexpectedly to his mind, and he made a sound of disgust.

'I told him I've had enough of shame and scandal. And if you wish to have me for yourself, you must put vermilion on my forehead and take me home.' She sensed his support as she said this, and sniffed loudly.

'And what did he say to that,' he asked.

'Oh, he's not prepared to accept that! He's willing to set me up comfortably here, and says he'll transfer a plot of land to my name, I asked him to send me back home, someone will come forward to take care to me. Perhaps that's when he got suspicious.

Adhan was quiet. After some time he said, 'Let's go now. It's getting dark.'

Slowly, almost unwillingly, they walked back. Beli continued, 'After all that's happened recently he's given up all hope. Now he wants to send me home.'

He felt relieved and said at once, 'Why, that would be the best thing for you. Once you've stayed at home for some time, things will improve and will soon be normal. Before long people will forget this whole affair'.

She didn't say anything, but seemed to become somewhat tense and ill at ease. A little later she began awkwardly, 'Now I can't go home...' and then broke off as though annoyed with someone, or maybe herself.

'Why', he asked sharply. She didn't reply.

'Why can't you go', he stopped and demanded impatiently. She took a few steps, then turned towards him. With her head bent and her eyes fixed on the ground. She answered in a voice that was barely audible. 'I'm with child. Two months. How can I go home now! Once again I'll have to share the guilt of another terrible sin...'

He felt as though something hot had been poured into his ears. There was a buzzing sound and he couldn't hear a thing. He could only stare at her stupidly, with disbelief. As she stood in front of him with head bent and eyes lowered, he

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stepped towards her. A sense of wonder mingled with anxiety, impatience and many other feelings struggled to seek expression through his voice. His blood surged. Like a total stranger he said in a harsh tone: 'What is it... tell me everything frankly. Everything.'

She became a little apprehensive. In the deepening gloom she could not see the expression on his face. Her head bent again as she said in a low voice, 'He told me he would marry me - take me away from here - he knew some sweet-sellers on the south bank.' She spoke rapidly, disjointedly, as if wanting to finish before he said or did something. But there was nothing more for her to add. She saw how his strong lithe body seemed to become weak and sag, and the speechless, motionless manner in which he stood. In the darkness, there rose in front of his eyes the image of a newborn infant, blood- red, like the rising sun. He saw a dark hairy hand stuffing a handful of salt into the tiny mouth. Its face contorted and turned blue. And he seemed to hear a desperate gulping cry that was suddenly stifled.

The next day as he went about his work, the same confused thoughts without beginning or end turned to his mind. He found himself thinking of his mother, and all the old forgotten questions that used to darken his mind came back to torment him. He seemed now to understand how a life hardened by misfortune and deprivation must have made his mother vulnerable and insecure and compelled her to be so cruel, so heartless towards him. Perhaps she felt so ashamed that she could not face him, or maybe, thought that he could not possibly ever want to see her after what she had done. His anger and hurt pride melted away and tearful memories came back to weigh down his heart. And the pitiful cry of the world in the voice of an infant rang in his ears time and again.

Before dusk he brought back the herd to the stockade. He appeared to have taken a decision and there was a brisk purposefulness in his actions. For too long he had felt himself to be no different from one of the animals that he had been tending all these years. But now a palpable change came over him. He remembered how, as a young teenager, he had crossed the swollen river to the south bank and entered the dangerous forest in the dead of night. As the forest came to his mind something seemed to become clear to him. He went down to the boat pulled up on the sands and tied a piece of bamboo to which he could attach a pair of oars. Then, with all his strength he pushed the boat down the bank to the river. It was as though someone else had possessed his body and was doing all the work, as though a child who had been long dead had come alive to find himself a strong youth of twenty-five years. He went into the hut and without hesitation, came out with his machete. Then going over to the stockade he stroked the buffaloes and loosened their tethers. Next he went and called out to Beli. She came and stood in the courtyard.

He came straight to the point. 'I've made up my mind to leave this place. I've come to ask you what you will do. Will you come with me?' There was no hesitation, no awkwardness. Someone else spoke in his voice, easily naturally.

'Where,' Beli asked in a voice tight with fear and astonishment.

'I don't know where. But I'm leaving for the south bank at once.' He answered.

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What on earth was happening! She stood there in a state of helpless perplexity. Adhan came up to her and took hold of her hands. Shocked, she strained back, but her hand remained firmly in his.

'I decided to leave thinking you would go with me. But I'm leaving even if you aren't,' he said. 'Tell me, will you go?' All the pent up feelings of a lifetime of deprivation rushed into that simple question.

She calmed herself. This is absolutely impossible, she thought. What is he saying!

'But my...', she began, then paused, irresolute.

'Your what.' He asked. Receiving no answer he repeated impatiently, 'Your what?' In the fading twilight, she looked directly at him and said clearly.

'The baby that...' But the sentence remained incomplete. The cruel irony of fate, grief, fear, despair and pride formed a lump in her throat.

He gave her tightly held hands a shake. 'That's why I'm asking you come with me. You can't possibly allow the same thing to happen again this time. Do you understand? Let's go!' With his agitated entreaty, he was almost seeking to compell her.

Long pregnant moments passed. Very slowly; the hands that he still held clenched into tight fists. Her body trembled, and; losing her balance, she tottered and almost fell against him. Adhan quickly put his hands around her and helped her stand upright.

'Get ready! Bring only yourself. It's a small boat. I'll leave the maid at Chabilal's place,' he spoke hurriedly. Above them was the vast sky. The myriad stars twinkling brightly lit up the dark earth like a land of dazzling enchantment. Below them was the swollen river throbbing with life. Circling undercurrents of water rose roaring to the surface. At places where the flow was obstructed, the water swirled around rapidly before finding a way out. At all times there was an intoxication in the motion of the flowing river which seemed to be forever in a state of constant transition.

'Will we make it to the other shore?' Sitting very close to him on the boat's plank, and peering through the darkness towards the invisible bank, Beli asked anxiously. Like a teenager attaining manhood, every limb of his body, every cell of it, every drop of his blood felt alive and maddened with a wild rush of energy. At her question, he too looked towards that mysterious, captivating bank. In his mind there was no doubt about the answer. He rested from rowing continuously for so long. He glanced at her once, then his eyes turned towards the splendid star-studded sky, the dark enchanted world around them, and the pulsating river carrying them onward. As if through a dream, he seemed to come to life. He picked up the oars again, and taking a deep breath, answered, 'Doesn't matter if we don't.'

*(Translation of the Assamese story **Baghe Tapur Rati** - Apurba Sarmah)*

Translated by Ruma Phukan



***Ruma Phukan** has been teaching English at Dibru College in Dibrugarh since 1979 and is now Head of the Department. She has published the English translations of a number of Assamese short stories. Her translation of Shri Arun Sarma's play Kukurnesia Manuh has been published by Katha. She is married, have got two sons. Her hobby is gardening.*

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Harekrishna Deka

why yudhisthir's story cannot be told

The Yudhisthir I want to tell you about is not the Yudhisthir that everybody knows about. That other Yudhisthir has in the meantime played out his role in the epic, and has gone honourably heavenwards.

There are crores of people who are like the Yudhisthir I am going to tell you about. Even if all the stories ever written in this world were to be added up, there would not be crores of fictional characters. Each one of those crores of people is likely to have individual, distinctive characteristics of his or her own. But it is not very likely that fiction writers will be able to use each one of those characters as raw material for their stories. It is not for this reason that I say that Yudhisthir's story cannot be told.

Of course, before saying why Yudhisthir's story cannot be told or written down, a few things must be said about Yudhisthir. Those are the things that I want to tell you.

It cannot be said that absolutely no interesting incidents occurred in Yudhisthir's life. On the other hand, these incidents were not that startling that they could be made delectable with delicious descriptions. These days, almost every day, newspapers publish many stories that are juicier, stories that wear the garb of truth.

As soon as I utter the words 'garb of truth', I feel like recounting the delicious story about Yudhisthir's name. The Yudhisthir of the epic was a heroic devotee of Truth. The reason behind our Yudhisthir becoming a Yudhisthir was Truth. Not, however, the pursuit of Truth.

Truth, but not the pursuit of Truth. Certainly, a story can be found here if this riddle is eliminated. Well, let me do that.

The first amazing thing that needs to be said is that Yudhisthir's name is not Yudhisthir at all. But now, if enquiries are made about his real name, he himself will either not be able to recall it clearly or be unwilling to disclose it.

He did have a given name. Since that name has entered the womb of forgetfulness, there is no point in bringing it to the bosom of recollection. But come, let us begin at the beginning. That beginning, though, is not exactly a riveting story.

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Not a riveting story, because before he became Yudhisthir, Yudhisthir was a child born into the unremarkable life of the family of an ordinary farmer in an obscure village. The only remarkable thing about his childhood was that he had the opportunity to set foot within the portals of a school, against the wishes of his father, to fulfil his mother's heart's desire. The son of a rustic father would turn out to be a farmer, too, so where was the need to study? It was with a belief of this kind that the man wished to take his son along with him to the fields as soon as he grew up a little. His unlettered mother, too, was a farmer's daughter. But she had seen a boy from her family going to college, and, later, going on to the city to work, she had seen him come home occasionally, wearing clothes of sparkling white, riding a shiny bicycle whose bell he kept tinkling, and she had breathed the city aroma that clung to him. It was the ambition of the mother, therefore, that her son, too, should study and go on to a city job. It was for this reason that she nagged Yudhisthir's father into making arrangements for sending her son to the village school near by.

I feel a little uncomfortable about referring to Yudhisthir by this name before he actually became Yudhisthir. Since his real name has vanished, let us call him Nokul for the time being.



Harekrishna Deka (b. 1943), is a noted poet, short story writer and literary critic. Mr. Deka, who retired as the DGP of Assam, has to his credit 14 books (collections of poems, short stories and critical essays taken together). He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1987 for his poetry collection Aan Ejan. He also won the Katha Award in 1997 for his short story Bandiyar.

Our Nokul showed some inclination for study. Perhaps it was due to his mother's influence. However, the poor boy's intelligence did not have much acuteness. Still, it was not as though he did not attend about three years of classes in the school's scholastic ladder. Perhaps it was due to his mother's influence also that our Nokul was meek and mild. He could not acquire the idle habits of his contemporaries and friends, and tried to do what was required of him at school in a straightforward manner.

The chaos came about for just that very reason.

The schoolteacher did not merely teach, he also had a domestic establishment. What with having to till his fields, and pen his cows and goats, it would be late by the time he reached school. He would be tired, too. Therefore, the teacher would catch up on his lost sleep while he made the class loudly recite either the arithmetic tables, or verses, in the name of study. Sometimes, he snored as well. He did not pay any attention to what the boys were reciting. It was only after he had had his forty winks that he would wake up with a start, and after teaching one or two lessons, would close the school for the day. He would bring with him to the school the cane that as a farmer, he would use on his cows while ploughing. He would use it to cane the students if they became too noisy or naughty. The teacher's anger was like a cobra. Sometimes, he would give vent to the anger roused by one, on quite another. Anger roused by a domestic event would be vented in the school. The boys could recognise by his very footsteps outside the classroom, the fact that the teacher's ire had been roused for some reason at home. On the days this happened, even the naughty ones did not behave mischievously.

That day, the teacher's footsteps did not thud loudly outside the door of the schoolroom. That meant that the teacher had not come from home in an angry state of mind. He came in with a heavy tread, dragging his sandals. The teacher was tired from his work at home that morning. The naughty ones noticed that

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there was even some mud sticking to the bit of their teacher's shin that was visible under his dhuti. This meant that he had come straight from the fields to school. There had not even been time to wash up before leaving. As soon as he arrived, the teacher gathered together all the various classes into one large group, and telling the eldest among the students to recite the tables, ordered the others to repeat them after him. After this, he began his nap at his table.

The boys recited their tables, and, growing restive, exchanged impish looks. I do not know who noticed it first, it must have been one of the naughty ones, but they saw that with his mouth open, their teacher was fast asleep, and the folds of his dhuti had come undone. The nudge from the boy who first noticed this made the boy next to him heed it, too. His nudge made another aware, after him, yet another, till the whole school noticed it. After this came the giggles, interspersed with the recitation of the tables. Giggle, giggle, giggle, tables, giggle, giggle, giggle, giggle, tables. After this came the sound of many people laughing out loud together, for nobody could control their giggles any more.

The teacher woke up. His had been a deep sleep. On top of that, as soon as he woke up, he saw that the boys, instead of reciting their tables, were nudging each other and laughing. It was a scene of anarchy. The teacher's cobra-like anger was roused. He slapped his cane on the table. He stood up with a roar. The boy before him on whom his eyes fell still had a laugh pasted on his sharp face. Even though others, too, had the same, it was this boy's laugh that the teacher noticed immediately. Looking at him, the teacher roared, 'Oi, you mongoose, what are you laughing about. hu? Why are you making such a noise, ha?' Saying this, the teacher advanced towards the boy.

The boy was meek and mild, the Nokul or Yudhisthir of our story. But the contagion of laughter had touched him, as well. When the others were all laughing, how could he keep from doing so? The teacher never remembered any boy's name, and indeed, never thought it necessary to do so at all. He addressed each boy according to requirement and occasion. When his eyes fell on this boy's sharp face, the teacher called him a mongoose, and whirling his cane in the air, began to advance towards him. The teacher's dhuti was already open. Its folds had come undone, and it was dragging on the floor. But he remained unaware of this. Even at that time, the mischief-makers in the back rows continued to giggle, but instead of acting on that, the angry teacher went to the fearful lad standing on the mat of split bamboo, and asked in a thunderous voice, 'Oi, what are you sniggering for, hu?' He whirled his cane mightily. Mamma's boy that he was, the lad remembered his mother's teaching, 'Always speak the truth', and pointing to his teacher's dhuti, said, 'Saar, saar, dhuti ...' It was only then that the teacher noticed his own dhuti, with its folds undone. Instead of getting irritated at his own carelessness, the teacher directed his anger at the lad who had caught him unawares by pointing out the truth. Thrashing at the boy's back with his cane, he said, 'Have you come here to study, or to gape at other people's dhutis, you mongoose?' In order to manage his dhuti, he dismissed the entire school for the day.

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The lad's schoolfellows laughed shrilly at him, teasing him by calling him 'Mongoose! Mongoose!' halfway down the road home. He had no objection to assuming the name of Mongoose, any name was good enough for others to call him by. What he did not understand was why the cane had whizzed down on him. Swallowing this first injury that came his way for telling the truth, he reached home.

It is not for nothing that we have temporarily given our Nokul this particular name. After this incident, his peers kept calling him 'Mongoose! Oi mongoose!' This continued till the teacher bestowed somebody else with another name.

The second crisis was even more serious. After our Nokul was promoted to the next class, his father, giving in to his mother's nagging, bought him a new slate. On the very first day that he came to school with the new slate, some rascal's gaze fell on it. This rogue's own slate was broken. He could not mention it at home because he himself had broken it. But he definitely needed a good slate. Therefore, as soon as he noticed our Nokul's new slate, a ploy for appropriating it came to his mind.

Before entering the classroom, the boys of the school would keep their slates, pencils, books and the mats of split bamboo on which they sat, on the veranda, and go to the tube-well nearby to take a drink of water. That day, our Nokul, too, kept his new slate in this manner, and went to have a drink of water. The rascal placed his own broken slate and books beneath Nokul's, and, as soon as Nokul returned from the water pump, confronted him, 'Oi, you've put your slate on top of mine. You've gone and broken it.' Nokul had already seen the rascal's broken slate before this. He therefore protested vehemently. He had never kept his own slate on top of that rogue's, and in any case that slate was broken from before. The rascal's friends, too, were scoundrels. They added their voices in chorus to their friend's, 'No, no, you've broken it, you've broken it! We saw it!'

The teacher appeared. The rascal tattled, 'Saar, he's broken my slate!'

The teacher asked, 'Oi, did you break his slate?'

He spoke truthfully, 'No, I did not break it, his slate was broken from before.'

The rascal's friends began to shriek, 'Saar, he broke it, we saw him!'

The teacher asked again, 'Oi, why don't you tell the truth, did you break it or not?'

Once more, he replied, 'No saar, I did not.'

Once more came the rogues' refutation in chorus.

The teacher's verdict: 'Hu, Dharmaveer Yudhisthir, Truth-Teller, he's not broken it. Not broken it, indeed. You've broken it all right. Go on, give him your slate, and you take his broken one.'

Again, the teacher said mockingly, 'Dharmaveer, Virtuous One, you've broken somebody else's slate, go home and tell your father to buy you a new one.'

This time, even though the teacher did not cane him on his back, a slash landed on his mind. In addition, he had lost his new slate, and after school finished, the rascals even jeered at him, calling him 'Yudhisthir! Yudhisthir!'

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When he showed his broken slate and told the truth at home, even his father thought that he himself had broken the new slate, and was now telling a lie. He was rewarded by his father with a box on his cheek.

In school, he began to be called "Yudhisthir, Yudhisthir", first by the rascals, then by all the others. Imperceptibly, as his peers used this name continuously, it became settled that it was indeed his name. Later, he himself came to assume that this was his actual name. His parents, of course, kept calling him by his given name.

An important fact will remain untold if the reason for Yudhisthir having to leave school is not given here. The scoundrels of the school would frequently indulge in all kinds of hooliganisms, and quite often, like a person venting the anger roused by bed bugs onto the ragged mat of split bamboo instead, the teacher's wrath would fall on the boys who were meek and mild. During the days when the fields had to be ploughed, the teacher would be more tired. There would be no time even to go home from the fields for a while before coming to the school. Therefore, the teacher would come straight from the fields to the school, and have a nap at the teacher's table itself.

It was on one such day that a wicked idea occurred to the rascals of the school. They wished to put some stinging nettle on the teacher's desk, and then watch the fun. One day, before the rest of the school arrived, the rascals put the nettle leaves on the teacher's desk. For some reason, Yudhisthir had reached school early that day. He witnessed this deed of theirs. The scoundrels warned him, 'We won't spare you if you tell on us.'

The teacher arrived, and, as was his habit, gave the boys a poem to recite. Placing his hands on the table, he was about to lower his head, when the sting of the nettles started an unbearable itch on his hands and head. The more he scratched the itch, the worse it got. In the meantime, there were the whispers and suppressed chortles coming from the back rows. Those in the front rows were in dire straits, for they, too, felt like bursting out laughing. Their faces were contorted with the effort to hold their laughter in. The teacher suspected that this was the handiwork of one of this lot. He would scratch himself, then look suspiciously at each face, hoping to catch the culprit out. As soon as his glance fell on them, the suppressed whispers would stop, the boys would swallow their giggles, and their bodies would shake with repressed mirth. The teacher, scratching his face and body uncontrollably with both hands, advanced threateningly towards the boys. He would not let off the scoundrels who had placed the nettles on his table at all easily.

It was Yudhisthir's bad luck. Those eyes, inflamed with fury, fell straightaway on him, even though there was no reason to suspect him. However, he was sitting in the first row. He was innocent, so what was there to be frightened of, he had thought, and had not even laughed. But the very fact of his not laughing became the reason for suspicion, and the teacher asked, 'Ei, Dharmaveer, Virtuous One, who kept this stuff on the table? What was it? You're sitting there so primly, was it you who kept it?'

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From behind, the rascals shouted in a highly enthusiastic chorus, 'Saar, it's him, saar! He's the one who put the nettles there, saar,' and so on. No matter how strenuously the boy said, 'No saar, I didn't put it there,' the chorus would increase in strength. Eventually, fed up, and forgetting, in his bid to save his own skin, the warning that the rascals had given him earlier, he screeched, 'Saar, I didn't put it there, saar. Those fellows did it.' Saying this, he pointed at the rascals.

The volume of the scoundrels' chorus rose even higher. 'Saar, saar, he's a lying Yudhisthir, saar. He put it there, saar. We saw him, saar. He put it there, and now he's blaming us.'

Standing before Yudhisthir, the teacher's anger increased in proportion to the increase in his itch. Unable to decide who had placed the nettles there, he decided the matter according to his own judgement by walloping Yudhisthir's back mercilessly with his cane, saying 'So, you've become Yudhisthir!' It was only after this that he felt some relief from the itchiness. Having no patience left to continue teaching, he declared school over for the day, and rushed home.

Yudhisthir, too, returned home along with the other boys, moaning with the pain of being thrashed on the back with the teacher's cane. The jeers of the rascals, who kept calling out, 'Oi Yudhisthir, Oi Yudhsithir' all the way back only increased the pain of his back.

After this, despite all her pleas and pleadings, Yudhisthir's mother failed to get him to return to school. Not only did he not go to school ever again, in his own mind, he took a tremendous oath. From that day, he decided that he would never speak the truth again. He mastered the habit of telling glib lies so well that he was even able to believe the untruth to be the truth. If the telling of a truth led to such problems in life, then why should he tell it? Though unaware of it, this became his philosophy of life.

After this, when we meet him again, he is a boatman. In spite of all his efforts, his father could not turn him towards the fields. Seeing an affinity for boats in his son, who by then was loafing around aimlessly, his father sent him with his own boat to the ghat, the landing stage for boats on the bank of the river, hoping that this would steady him. And well did it steady him.

His mother had wished her son to be a townie. Yudhisthir had no schooling. Therefore, he could not become a townie. But the ghat where he became a ghatoi, a ferryman, pleased him. He stayed on at that place. Gradually, shops and other establishments appeared around that ghat. An open air marketplace, too, sprang up there. The number of people who crossed the river increased. A police outpost, too, was established some distance away. In this manner, a city aroma came to Ferryman Yudhisthir. For a small town grew around the ghat. And his mother's wish came true, even if in a roundabout manner. Later, finding it difficult to commute from home, Yudhisthir built a small hut on the banks of the river, near the ghat. And people, too, found it convenient when the ferryman began to stay overnight at the ghat itself.

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Yudhisthir faced no problem whatsoever during the times when he lied so glibly. But how can a story exist when there is no incident, no problem, no strife, where life moves in uncomplicated lines? There is no story in this portion of Yudhisthir's life. But it is not for this reason that I say that Yudhisthir's story cannot be told.

Yudhisthir is not the hero of some delectable tale. But the story of how he became entangled in this tale needs to be told. We shall try to search out the fountain head of the story there. Incidents do not make up a story. A story is created when there is a problem in the story line, which gives a twist to the tale. But let me give you the preface.

Speaking the truth during his childhood had proved disastrous for Yudhisthir. After this, without any further calamity, he grew to teenage-hood. Gradually, he became a youth. And after that, he became the Ferryman who was known to all. People from the town knew him, people from the village knew him. Ploughmen knew him, traders knew him. Thieves knew him, the police knew him. They all knew him, because everybody crossed the river on his boat. By now, everybody knew that he was a glib liar. Since his lies did not harm anybody, nobody was bothered. The daroga, the Officer in Charge of the thana, the police outpost, also knew that he was a habitual liar. Let me tell you the rather appetising story of how the daroga came to know this.

One day, soon after his transfer to this place, in the course of conducting an investigation, the daroga had had to catch a boat to cross the river. Sitting in the boat, the daroga had struck up a conversation with the ferryman. At that time, the daroga had not known the ferryman's name. He had asked, 'So, Ghatoi, what's your name?'

He had replied, 'Yudhisthir, saar.' The ferryman was not about to tell the daroga his real name, and thus disclose the truth.

The daroga had joked, 'Aah, here's a Dharmaveer, a Virtuous One!'

He had replied, 'Dharma is my father's name.'

The daroga had indeed taken his father's name to be Dharma. Once more, he had asked, 'Is that so? Where does your father live?'

'Deuta is on the other shore, Master.'

The daroga had assumed that his father had passed away, or gone on to shores of eternity.

It was in this way that Yudhisthir had fun, by spicing up his mendacious words in conversation. Yudhisthir's father's name was not Dharma. The meaning of his words was that he believed in Dharma, or Virtue. (He had in the meantime accepted the art of lying to be a virtue.) Besides, Yudhisthir's father had not died, in other words, had not gone on to the shores of eternity. Yudhisthir's village, where his father lived, was on the other bank of the river. It was only much later that the daroga was able to make out the true meaning of Yudhisthir's cryptic language. The daroga was wonderstruck at Yudhisthir's expertise in speaking in this manner.

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If he had not been wonderstruck, Yudhisthir would not have entered this story at all. The straight line of his life would have moved like the thread on a loom, from this bank of the river to the other.

How can Yudhisthir's life remain without incident? I have already said that a small town had sprung up around the landing stage in which he worked. Of course there was still a scent of the rural about the place.

In the village, rumours fly thick and fast, in the town, it is an incident that creates an uproar. Since the place where Yudhisthir's ghat was situated was halfway to being a town, both incident and rumour occurred there. Still, even with these occurrences, nothing of a sensational nature happened, there was only grist for rumourmongers. But since it was a small town, the gossip resonated all around, and became a topic for discussion among the people. The discussion would later metamorphose into rumour.

A variety of passengers crossed the river on Yudhisthir's boat. When some incident occurred, there would be heated discussions among the passengers on his boat. However, he did not take much part in them. Some of the passengers were known to him, some unknown. Sometimes, he would let loose a falsehood in the conversation of those he knew, and put the heat on the topic under discussion. The people whom he knew were those who crossed the river daily. It was because they did so every day that he remembered their faces. He did not remember the faces of those whom he did not know.

However, one day, a couple of faces that he saw remained in his memory. An unknown youth crossed the river with a young girl very early one morning. The young man returned in the evening. The young girl did not accompany him back. It was dusk. There was no need for Yudhisthir to look attentively at the youth. But the young man, after sitting down in the boat, asked Yudhisthir, 'Ghatoi, do you see me?'

This was a senseless question. Yudhisthir could see the youth in front of him, and yet here was the young man, asking if Yudhisthir could see him! Yudhisthir therefore took a good look at him. Of course a reply quickly tripped off his tongue, used as it was to lying smoothly, 'No, I don't see you, deo...'

The youth said approvingly, 'Good, good you haven't seen me.' After that, he changed his tone, and threatened, 'But listen now. Even if someone asks you, tell them you haven't seen me.'

It was a very simple calculation for Yudhisthir. He smelled something fishy when the youth came out with this threat. But he could recite the tables of untruth very fluently. Therefore, it did not take Yudhisthir even a moment to nod his head.

In the town, though, an incident occurred which stunned the daroga. Since the elections were round the corner, the rumour mills, too, became busy at the same time. The incident had the potential of putting the government in a spot. The dead body of a young girl was discovered in a thickly wooded place. Not just her dead body. The girl had been pregnant. Therefore, it was a serious affair. There were demands that the culprit should be brought to book immediately. The Opposition

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said the ruling party should be ashamed, the law and order situation was going to the dogs. The ruling party was in danger of losing the coming elections. The daroga was spending sleepless nights. The order from the top was inflexible. The murderer had to be nabbed quickly. Otherwise, the daroga would not be able to hang on to his job. Everybody grew highly agitated, not because of the pitiful end of the dead girl, but because of the political rumours.

The daroga would be in trouble if he could not handle the situation. But after prostrating himself full length at the temple of Bholanath the Saviour, a ray of divine illumination came to him. The inquiry began to move on the path of a speedy conclusion. Very soon, the culprit was arrested.

The criminal was thus discovered. But where were the statements from the witnesses? Without a statement from a witness, how could the daroga produce the accused in the wooden enclosure of the courtroom?

It was then that the daroga remembered Yudhisthir. Through the junior daroga, he issued a summons and had Yudhisthir brought to the thana. The daroga told Yudhisthir, 'You will have to be a witness.'

Yudhisthir was dumbfounded. It seemed as though the thread on his loom was getting all tangled up. 'Witness, hujoor, I?'

'Yes, you. Don't worry. The murderer has been nabbed. All you have to do is say that you recognise him.'

The thread on his loom appeared to shuttle swiftly before Yudhisthir's eyes. Wrapped in the scandal of much rumour, this piquant affair had become a story running into several instalments among the passengers travelling on his boat. Since he was past master at fabricating untruths, Yudhisthir would occasionally add a bit of colour to the scandal, stirring up the stories told by those of his passengers whom he knew. That was all. And now here was the daroga, catching him and bringing him to this place to become a witness.

He asked fearfully, 'What will I have to say, hujoor?'

The daroga replied, 'You will have to say that you know who the murderer is. You have seen him killing the victim.'

This meant that he would not have to tell the truth. Fabrications came easily to him. Yudhisthir had not seen the murder take place. He drew a breath of relief. He was always ready to fib. He said, 'All right, hujoor.'

The daroga told him, 'Make sure you say everything properly. I will tell you what you have to say. I will give you a reward if you stand witness properly.'

Yudhisthir already knew that telling the truth led to punishment. Now, he realised that telling an untruth brought rewards.

The daroga said, 'The murderer is already in the lockup. I will present you in court in advance. The lawyer will question you. Say that you recognise the man. I will tell you how the incident happened. Tell them exactly what I teach you. There'll be a reward for you, and for me, too. But if there's the slightest discrep-

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ancy, you will go right off to the other shore.'

"The other shore" did not mean the shores of eternity, after death. What the daroga meant was that Yudhisthir would have to leave the ghat and return to his father's village, and sit idle and empty-handed in the barren fields. The daroga threatened him by taking off on the meaning of the 'other shore' from Yudhisthir's own earlier phrase. But Yudhisthir was not worried. After all, he would just have to recite some lies. Yudhisthir was an expert at cooking up falsehoods, which sputtered out from his mouth like freshly popped paddy.

In due course, Yudhithir appeared in the court. The daroga had coached him properly on what he was to say. He had also secretly shown Yudhisthir the accused in the lockup. The imprisoned man was not unknown to him. He was a thief. He had occasionally crossed the river on his boat. But what was it to Yudhisthir, anyway? He would have to take an oath, then tell the untruth. He would recite the untruth quite merrily. When the daroga coached him on how to speak as a witness, he also showed Yudhtisthir a picture of the dead girl. It was only when he saw the picture that he was startled. She had crossed the river on his boat just once. But he still remembered her. She had gone to the other bank, and not returned. Her corpse had turned up the next day.

The courtroom. The accused was in the wooden enclosure. Yudhisthir was the eyewitness. The judge was in his seat. Yudhisthir had already taken an oath to speak the truth, and he would then tell untruths. The Government pleader was getting ready to present the case.

Before replying to the lawyer's questions, Yudhisthir, seeking reassurance from the daroga, looked around to see where he was sitting, and glanced at the people in the front row. Yudhisthir's heart leaped mightily within him. There, no doubt was the daroga sitting there with a reassuring look on his face. But who was that with him? Yudhisthir had seen the plump-faced person sitting right next to the daroga countless times on the election posters, his smiling visage waving gently in the breeze. He was seeking the votes of the public again for re-election in the coming polls. A young man was beside him. Yudhisthir recognised him. He had crossed the river on his boat very early one morning with the young girl. The youth had returned alone in the evening. He had warned Yudhisthir not to tell anyone that he had seen him. The girl's corpse had turned up the next day. Yudhisthir did not know what a montage was. But the three or four scenes that flashed before his eyes were like the montage in a film. Even if the others in this courtroom did not know who the actual murderer was, Yudhisthir was now sure about his identity. That youth was the murderer. He was sitting near his powerful father with a wide grin on his face.

Ferryman Yudhishtir had set out to tell a simple story with his fib. But now his craft had run aground on the sands of the river's landing stage. The yarn of the story was entangled in the twisting-reel of his falsehood.

That, which was just a yarn, becomes a story at this point. I want to tell you this story about Yudhisthir. How can Yudhisthir solve this problem? The story will

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conclude only when the yarn is unknotted.

Yudhisthir knew the thief who was standing, bewildered, in the wooden enclosure. Would he now lie to the honourable court and point out the thief to be the murderer? His evidence could send the man to the gallows.

In that case, in this breathless moment, would he then, bruised and battered by his wounded conscience, become upright and truthful? Would he then point a finger to the young man, would he say, 'Honourable Judge, that young man is the murderer. It's him you must try.'

It is quite possible for the story to unravel in this manner. This solution has been dramatically shown innumerable times on the silver screen to the enthusiastic applause of the audience.

The writer is prepared to accept this accepted solution as a means of unknotting the yarn.

But...

In his mind's eye, Yudhisthir equated the young man and his stout father with his old schoolteacher. The folds of his dhuti were open, in his hand was the cane used by ploughmen to beat the cows with.

Yudhisthir was stunned. The cane was moving to and fro. His story had got stuck at that point.

Even then, the writer wishes to take the story forward. It doesn't matter that problems are created in stories, they are closed within the story, too. It is only then that the story is completed.

But the writer's pen remains stuck.

Certainly you should be told the reason for this. An example will have to be given. Since you, too, were once the editor of a newspaper, I wish to give you this particular example. Take, for instance, a particular newspaper. Thousands of copies are sold, the paper's popularity rises enormously. But the readers know that those luscious news items that are published every day contain no truth. And this is why they read it. They read it because it is fiction. A story. Would readers believe it if that newspaper were to publish a truth?

In that case...

If Yudhisthir, who had always lied so glibly, if he were to point to the murderer and tell the truth, would anybody believe it to be the truth?

Yudhisthir's story cannot move beyond this question.

The writer is helpless. The writer has no idea where the convolutions of the story will lead. The temperature of the flame beneath the vessel of the story has risen high. But the story is yet to be cooked through. ❑

Translated by Mitra Phukan



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The courtroom. The accused was in the wooden enclosure. Yudhisthir was the eyewitness. The judge was in his seat. Yudhisthir had already taken an oath to speak the truth, and he would then tell untruths. The Government pleader was getting ready to present the case.

Before replying to the lawyer's questions, Yudhisthir, seeking reassurance from the daroga, looked around to see where he was sitting, and glanced at the people in the front row. Yudhisthir's heart leaped mightily within him. There, no doubt was the daroga sitting there with a reassuring look on his face. But who was that with him? Yudhisthir had seen the plump-faced person sitting right next to the daroga countless times on the election posters, his smiling visage waving gently in the breeze. He was seeking the votes of the public again for re-election in the coming polls. A young man was beside him. Yudhisthir recognised him. He had crossed the river on his boat very early one morning with the young girl. The youth had returned alone in the evening. He had warned Yudhisthir not to tell anyone that he had seen him. The girl's corpse had turned up the next day. Yudhisthir did not know what a montage was. But the three or four scenes that flashed before his eyes were like the montage in a film. Even if the others in this courtroom did not know who the actual murderer was, Yudhisthir was now sure about his identity. That youth was the murderer. He was sitting near his powerful father with a wide grin on his face.

Ferryman Yudhishtir had set out to tell a simple story with his fib. But now his craft had run aground on the sands of the river's landing stage. The yarn of the story was entangled in the twisting-reel of his falsehood.

That, which was just a yarn, becomes a story at this point. I want to tell you this story about Yudhisthir. How can Yudhisthir solve this problem? The story will

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conclude only when the yarn is unknotted.

Yudhisthir knew the thief who was standing, bewildered, in the wooden enclosure. Would he now lie to the honourable court and point out the thief to be the murderer? His evidence could send the man to the gallows.

In that case, in this breathless moment, would he then, bruised and battered by his wounded conscience, become upright and truthful? Would he then point a finger to the young man, would he say, 'Honourable Judge, that young man is the murderer. It's him you must try.'

It is quite possible for the story to unravel in this manner. This solution has been dramatically shown innumerable times on the silver screen to the enthusiastic applause of the audience.

The writer is prepared to accept this accepted solution as a means of unknotting the yarn.

But...

In his mind's eye, Yudhisthir equated the young man and his stout father with his old schoolteacher. The folds of his dhuti were open, in his hand was the cane used by ploughmen to beat the cows with.

Yudhisthir was stunned. The cane was moving to and fro. His story had got stuck at that point.

Even then, the writer wishes to take the story forward. It doesn't matter that problems are created in stories, they are closed within the story, too. It is only then that the story is completed.

But the writer's pen remains stuck.

Certainly you should be told the reason for this. An example will have to be given. Since you, too, were once the editor of a newspaper, I wish to give you this particular example. Take, for instance, a particular newspaper. Thousands of copies are sold, the paper's popularity rises enormously. But the readers know that those luscious news items that are published every day contain no truth. And this is why they read it. They read it because it is fiction. A story. Would readers believe it if that newspaper were to publish a truth?

In that case...

If Yudhisthir, who had always lied so glibly, if he were to point to the murderer and tell the truth, would anybody believe it to be the truth?

Yudhisthir's story cannot move beyond this question.

The writer is helpless. The writer has no idea where the convolutions of the story will lead. The temperature of the flame beneath the vessel of the story has risen high. But the story is yet to be cooked through. ❑

Translated by Mitra Phukan



Mitra Phukan is a classical vocalist, children's writer, novelist, translator, columnist and music critic. Her novel The Collector's Wife published by Penguin-Zubaan has won critical acclaim. She is also a freelance editor.

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the mask

'Take the masks, take the masks
Dear brothers, look at the masks
Masks of lions and tigers
And apes but not of gods'

(A)

My goodness! I'm talking of Prasanna Master. His earlobes are getting flabby and wrinkled owing to old age. He seemed to be possessed by a ghost. Instead of toasting himself near the hearth in warm clothes from top to toe, he takes a bath daily at night-that too in the biting cold of December.

Indrani, his daughter, is the only person who can talk to him. She tosses and tumbles in her tellings off. What a pity! Day by day he is being foolish and whimsical, and he moves about gabbing whatever comes to his lips. Only after reading the newspaper, no matter how late the paper is flung like a packet of sweets, he takes his bath and mutters, 'Reading lots of news of persons dead or killed, I feel as if I came back from the cremation ground. I would never touch it again after having my bath.'

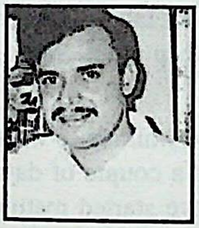
And what about the bath at night? 'Doordarshan telecasts the same happening vividly with picture.' That is his barbed comment. One day Master was waiting for a scrap dealer at the doorstep with a pile of old newspapers for sale. Finding no trace of any scrap dealer he engaged himself in other chores. Along this stretch of road, hawkers of all descriptions come and go continually from the morning hours like a string of ants. A lame cow of ash colour called Kazala brought interruption in a flurry like the 'Black cats.' That day, Master could hardly 'rescue' the pile of papers as he missed the time of her arrival. By the time Master came face to face with her, she devoured one and a half kilos of the newspapers.

Naturally, everybody expected that Master would get furious and lay about Kazala with any twig or stick he could lay his hands on. But nay, at the very moment, Master became pensive, he felt a pious beatitude at the sight of Kazala devouring the newspapers. He remained in that mood for some time, then all of a sudden he

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entered the house, and bringing a pot of water ritually washed the hooves of the cow like the feet of a Brahmin and prostrated before her on the ground.

None could tell how long Master remained in his prostration. It took about twenty long minutes from the moment Kazala lowing her 'editorial blessings' and leaving the spot at her will with the typical gait of a 'potbellied intellectual' to the moment she reached the other end of the lane. At the moment, let Parikshit Barman, the retired Professor of Assamese of the local college, come. They were of the same age. Their houses are facing each other. Every morning and evening they walked together in the polluted air and then they indulged in juicy gossips either in Barman's or Master's house. The Professor went out to inquire of the gas cylinder that was not delivered even after the lapse of one and a half months of its due date. Coming across Master, he greeted, 'How are you? What was the worship you have offered at the gate?'



Dr. Rabin Sarma (b. 1960) is a powerful Assamese short story writer who has to his credit three collections of short stories. A teacher by profession, Mr. Sarma obtained his Ph.D from Gauhati University in folklore and has made his mark in folklore studies in Assam. He won the first Munin Barkataki Award, 1995, for his short story collection Panchar Pachali.

'Just receiving, not worshipping', Master replied and narrated in detail what happened. Barman's anger caused by the scarcity of gas cylinder immediately found its outlet. 'Which way has she gone?' Barman said in an angry tone as if she has to repay an old loan. Craning his neck to and fro he raised his voice,'What does she not relish? That day a *saree* was aired by one of my tenants living on the upper storey. The wind blew it down to the ground. And then and there she devoured it. Ramu somehow managed to salvage a bit of the flowery edge of it from her mouth. And your newspapers! These are today's enzyme, Hazmola, Sir. We have read and read lots of news items but they have got digested everyday. What do you think of her?'

Master said, 'Leave it now, please. I have not made obeisance to her for her phenomenal digestive power. To me, she is the very incarnation of *Nilakanthi*. The manner she has munched the newspaper covering the burning Assam for the last two months has made me pay obeisance to her...'

For about a year, Master was staying at the home of his daughter. On the completion of the Silver Jubilee of Kenduguri High School, he started off to Guwahati. Since then his native village, even at the sight of a flight of herons in the evening, hardly came to his mind. One day he said to Barman, 'On the very day of my retirement, I got a packet of books as a token of my selfless service. At home, when I opened it eagerly, I found a copy of Sankardev's *Kirtan* and a copy of Dracula, a horror thriller with the painting of a ghost, a dagger and a flying Dracula on its front cover, which horrified me. I was shocked! What type of book is this? Then came the meeting for the formation of reception committee of the Silver Jubilee of the School. I was in the chair, and when it was my turn to give the presidential address, I said "What is the use of such pomp and circumstance? If we have to celebrate the Silver Jubilee, let all our teachers vow publicly today itself that in future each matric candidate would secure the first division every year. Ten of them would obtain later marks, at least one of them would be among the toppers. Let us address ourselves to that aim only...'

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'After my speech, all of them started to protest vehemently': 'Well our old master, what age are you now living in? Why should we not hold meetings? Why should not take donations? Why should we not invite ministers? What about our procession? Why no cultural show? What are you saying, oldie? Give up the charir right now!'...

'Well Professor, only on that day, I did realize the dread of a flying Dracula. Aren't we some kind of Dracula?'

Slowly Barman said, 'Outsider.'

'What is that?'

'Stranger, foreigner'

'What do you mean?'

'Which current set of values do we feel at home in? Have we not fallen on apart again and again like shooting stars? That's why nowadays I keep mum. What's the use?' ... Barman trailed off.

Barman fell silent for a long while. Two spiders started the rope walking to wave afresh a web over the photograph of his deceased wife. Only a couple of days ago, he did the old dusty web of the spiders. Today, they have started mating again. But what about human beings? As he is still alive, the photograph has been saved from being dilapidated. Tomorrow, when he'll be no more...!'

A weary melancholy pained Barman's heart.

He has two sons, both of them have settled elsewhere with their families. The elder one lives in Cochin. The younger one is wandering today in Dehradun, tomorrow in Mumbai. In his ancestral house in Guwahati, he lives in a room alone between two tenant families. Few days ago, he kept one of his cousins with him. He was even been admitted to a college. One day, he also disappeared like a bird free from a cage. His sons and daughters-in-law were sending letter to him now and then. He received letters from them at least after one month or a fortnight. He had enough time and preparation to reply to their letters... 'I'll tell them do's and don't's. Daughters-in-law deprived of mother-in-law! They may not know the hard facts of life. Piku and Mini, our grand children, should acquire the mother tongue. I'm sending them a few Assamese primers from here. Teach them well. Only the sweet mother tongue can gratify our hearts...'

Alas! Nowadays even the handwriting of their letters is getting scarce. Now they talk on phone, that too at night, when the situation is tense because of bomb blasts or unrest. The STD line gets off while calling 'Hello, hello'. Barman thinks if his inner feelings, the gossamer of his longing, sometimes lie frozen in his bed at dead midnight...

'Well Professor, Sahib,' Master broke the silence like the snapping of threads of a warping frame to introduce a new topic. Have you ever thought of becoming an extremist?'

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Stumped, Barman asked him back, 'Have you?'

Master replied with a smile, 'Don't get scared, I am an extremist. The doctor has already given me the certificate - hypertension! I simply can't manage anything in daily life without being peevish. Today, I'm fed up with any situation - grouchy, inflexible, insistent, and adamant a soldier never admitting the defeat of conscience. Are you afflicted with such thoughts? If so, you too are an extremist. We don't stay in a jungle, we have no arms and ammunition, - the preserved values of ours decay at heart owing to heartache and the prick of conscience'...

All of a sudden the lights were off - perhaps, the load shedding of the first hour. In the darkness, the breathing of two wise elderly teachers mingled with the ticking of the wall clock -

Then?

And then?

'I'm a player, move about playing

Show and sell my masks at mart.

I blow the pipe, clash the cymbals, beat the drum.

Do have a look at, if soon you come,

The masks of Yama and of the king...'

(B)

It was 15 August. In the late evening the prolonged Assam Bandh got back home humping the luggage of peace and violence. At that time Master was taking out the rundown-batteries from the Philips radio and putting in the groove the new batteries he had brought the day before, and then switched it on. Some programme on request was going on - the hostess rattled the names of persons as done in the roll call. Right at that moment a motor bike began to thrum at the gate. Putting aside the radio, he rose to see who might come at the inauspicious dusk. A husky boy came forward huffing and puffing, and with a parched tongue conveyed a piece of news. No sooner had he heard the name 'Rohini' in the middle of the sentence than Master uttered 'What, what?'. Meanwhile, the messenger jumped onto his bike and vanished in a wink like a snake catching hawk.

Just at the moment, the radio blared out 'Van de-e-e-e mataram.'

Coming back Master flung the radio off, and then collapsed in the courtyard. Luckily his servant was present there at the moment. He was listening to the music after smoking the cowshed out. He began to tremble at such a sorry sight of Master. Helpness, he began to cry at the top of his voice. Whichever families heard it, they all rushed to the courtyard. They managed to take him to bed. One of them riding on a bicycle rushed to inform the Doctor son-in-law, who was then at Gossaingaon. Till his arrival, some one applied oil and water on Master's head.

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After some time, his son-in-law turned up. After a checkup, he gave Master an injection. Till then nobody had any inkling of the incident. Hesitatingly somebody disclosed the truth... 'Well, they say, Rohini himself took them...' 'Nay', someone said, 'it was they who took Rohini. The bomb exploded in the half way.' 'What a pity! How could he join hands with them being a son of such a reputed family?'

'What a shocking state of affairs! Who knows what will happen to the young generation?... The entire state has turned into a Kurukshetra...' 'Leave your Kurukshetra out, who are the Kauravas and who are the Pandavas today? Who do you regard as your foe?'

The priest was beating the nagara in the temple of Bathow (Siva) drum, drum, drum... The drumbeats that sounded louder than usual echoed in everybody's heart. Slowly the village became calm and quiet after the howling of foxes and the barking of dogs. It seemed that the ghosts of fear and suspicion danced a weird dance gate after gate with the hooting of owls.

Master came to his senses at midnight. His youngest daughter was sitting up beside him. His son-in-law was sleeping fitfully in the other bed. Master opened his eyes and was groping for someone. The daughter grabbed his hands. His parched lips sought water. The son-in-law rushed to him and with the help of a spoon he poured a few spoonfuls of water into his mouth. He looked into the eyes of his son-in-law, and swallowing hard a couple of times he muttered 'I will not go to the police station... I am not his Apha (father) for such an act...'

The disconsolate daughter pressed her mouth with her *chadar* and began to sob, and the Doctor sent her away by force. He checked the pulse and pressure of his father-in-law once again. Meanwhile Master feel asleep.

After a gap of many days, Master's face was beaming like the bright sunshine.

On that day, two carpenters were engaged to repair his house. Two of corrugated tin sheets of the roof were almost eaten up. While planning to replace them the boat of his life got sucked down into the whirlpool of the river of time. It was his sheer luck that he was bestowed with a long lifeline for which he could calculate the new days, months, tithis and stars in the horoscope of his suffering. Looking back, you see the shadows of people only. You simply can't find any auspicious days and heartening news. Nowadays you will come across Yogini at every step. How will you start on a new journey freeing yourself from the fetters?...

The young carpenter climbed up the roof of the house to fit two new sheets, the old carpenter was giving directions to him from the ground. The young carpenter having driven the nail with more force than required, the old one shouted at him, 'Hey my sonny, go a bit slow. These are not tata but dalda!'

Master was tickled by the remark. Just at that moment, the postman clinking the bell of his bicycle turned up and greeting Master, handed over a letter to him. Master could identify the handwriting of the letter immediately. The letter was from his youngest daughter Indrani. Her handwriting was like the long, crooked

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and pointed horns of a deer. At the time they were living in Guwahati. His son-in-law had left Gossaigaon just after he fully recovered from the disease. He had been in medical service, and after getting the job there was no point of ruining his career by staying back in a village like Gossaigaon.

Master took out the letter and began to read. The substance of the letter was this? 'Apha (father) do come here at once, My husband has been transferred. I am living all alone in the big spacious house. I do not know anybody here, nor I'm known to anybody. It is quite uncertain that he would be transferred back. It's easy, take an auto at the station and follow the direction I have given in the letter...'

(C)

At last Master decided to set out for Indrani's house that day. As he was about to lock the house associated with flesh and blood since his birth, tears rolled down his cheeks. The sun of her life having gone down, his wife took the holy water with basil leaves between her feeble lips, and after years, her memories stirred up his heart. As he bowed down before the photograph of his wife in the vacant house, he felt her presence near him, the *dug-dugi* (locket) around her neck dangling over the dakhana over her breasts was creeping under his shirt like a vermilion millipede.. Oh! Rohini, where did I miss you, and what for?

Master, ever guilty like the King Dasaratha before the sage Andhaka, touched the feel of his wife and burst into tears. 'Curse me, curse...' Master composed himself at the call of his servant. Wiping the trickle of tears away, he unfolded his umbrella just to cover his face and said. 'The cowshed is handed over to you.' He hastened towards the station.

On that day, the passenger train was late as usual. When it reached the Guwahati station having a little chat at every station, Guwahati was going to remove its evening makeup. At the station, Master hired an auto and tried to follow the direction given in the letter by his daughter. Right at that moment somebody called him from behind in a very familiar voice, 'Hello! You are Master, aren't you?'

Turning back, Master recognized him- Gopi! Our Gopi, the wag! There is none in our locality who has not known him, who has not enjoyed his waggery.

But why is he at the Guwahati station during such odd hours at night? Surprised, Master asked 'Where are you from, chap?'

'I've travelled in the same passenger train, I got in at Sorbhog' replied Gopi.

A dejected woman holding a baby in her arms was standing beside Gopi. When his eyes fell on her, Master asked, 'Who is the young woman?'

Gopi replied, 'She is my own daughter, married off at Dighaldari, I've come here with a serious matter. I had a glimpse of you at the Tihu station, but couldn't meet you as the train pulled out meanwhile.'

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Master asked, 'Well, now tell me why you have come to Guwahati at night.' His daughter holding the child in arms began to weep before Gopi could say anything. The driver of the hired auto rose from the seat and stood beside Gopi with a view to taking part in the conversation.

Gopi said, 'Now it is about two months since the bomb went off in Aithabari, just near the house of my daughter. She was busy with feeding gruel to the baby. It was then that the bomb went bang. My son-in-law was not at home, he has to move about for his business purpose. On hearing the thunderous bang the villagefolk began to flee helter-skelter. You know, once the military turned the entire village deserted. My daughters managed to reach a hamlet one mile away where one of the uncles of my son-in-law lives. I got the news late after one week. Having reached there I found the grandson in a pathetic condition. Although he took food and moved his bowels, his eyes remained shut all the time. He was admitted to the nearby dispensary and was given medicine. Oh no! He won't simply respond. At last the doctor referred the case to the Medical College Hospital. I've brought him in the passenger train. I've absolutely no idea about this. I am feeling relieved now after meeting you.

Gopi the wag who brought the house down during many performances in his life, failed to make his own life clourful. Master's eyes were dim with tears. He wiped them away with the wrapper draped over his shoulder. Touching the wag, Master assured him, 'Don't worry as you have met me. I'll put you up at the Medical. There would have been no problem if my son-in-law had been there. Let's now get into the auto'. Having taken their seats in the auto, Master told the auto-driver to drive them to the Medical. And the driver breaming with youthful vigour instantly pulled the kick.

The driver was certainly jovial by nature. When the auto coming out of the stand reached the overbridge, the auto-driver played the tape just to defuse the tense situation. Chug chugging like a rice mill the tape blared out ... Raghu-pati-Ra-gha-ba-Rajja-ra

Coasting down the bridge, the auto driver abruptly applied the brakes .. the auto came to a screeching halt; the tape was switched off too. Army Checking. The Hindi-speaking officer accompanied by the rifle-toting. Black Cats grilled them all in such a way as if some dreaded extremist breaking the jail were sitting there. The auto-driver managed to save the situation making the officer understand the case of the boy in the lap of his mother, whom he pointed out as evidence.

The auto resumed its journey, but Master was obsessed with the thought of being chased by the leopard-like gaze of the jawans.

The auto having covered a short distance, Master asked the driver, 'Has any violence erupted anywhere? Brother! What a thorough checking!'

The driver looking at Master's face in the rearview mirror said, 'why have you sported the gamocha around your neck? They are very suspicious about this thing.

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It's now very difficult to go to our Nalbari. Gopi and Master looked at each other, then with a sting Gopi burst out, 'Who are they pointing guns at our culture? Generation after generation is going on this way. We'll never take off the gamocha around our neck for fear of them...'

Master spent that night at the Medical College Hospital. Crows began to caw when Master left the hospital having got Gopi's grandson admitted after passing through a lot of formalities. But he did not feel tired at all, nor drowsiness numbed his senses. What a surprise! The child after being given about half a bottle saline, once opened his eyes and rolled them towards Master. He was bowled over by an inexplicable delight. He put his hand on Gopi and with a voice choked with emotion said, 'we must live in this way in the eye of our new generation. They must see us while they open their eyes. Gopi, your grandson will call me Abow (grandfather), my grandson will go to your show on my shoulder, won't you amuse us 'Why not!' Gopi clasped Master's hand and burst into a song...

'At home is my daughter's mom,

Phuleswari, so dear and sweet

Our home is under the Champa tree

There's a wooden pestle but nothing to grind

Japes are there but getting so dry.

Masks, masks, Oh brothers, just have a look at!'

(D)

All of a sudden the lights were on. Nobody was there in the room. Both Parikshit Barman and Prasanna Brahma, who were talking a little while ago, vanished in darkness mysteriously.

The clock was ticking away as usual. Having spun a web over the photograph of Barman's wife, the two spiders were sitting in snug intimacy like a pair of young lovers in the park. Only the pair of eyes of the woman in the photograph misted over like the moon veiled in a thin cloud.❑

Translated by Nirendra Nath Thakuria

Translated from the original Assamese story MUKHA Published in Goriyoshi 2000 / April issue.



Nirendra Nath Thakuria (b. 1960) is a senior lecturer in English at Pragyotish College. A prose writer and sensitive translator, he has translated Assamese poems, short stories and critical prose pieces into English. He is now Associate Editor of Yaatra.

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the slaughter

'You are late again today.'

As Mahichandra groped his way to the gate, the light from his torch boring into the misty darkness; the spirited allegation took him by surprise. He always came back home at this hour. In the winters the greater part of his evenings were spent in the headman's courtyard, warming himself by the fire. Today was no exception. On the other hand his wife's voice sounded strangely unfamiliar. The note of muffled excitement seemed out of character in the listless, subdued woman he knew.

'What do you mean?' he inquired, surprised, 'I am early today. It is barely evening.'

'Do hurry up and come in,' Lakhimi turned and hastened towards the kitchen. Puzzled, Mahichandra, held back for a few moments before following her in.

In the feeble light of the lamp, Mahichandra saw a smile light up Lakhimi's wan face like a ray of sunshine. It seemed to him that his wife looked much younger all of a sudden.

'Why don't you tell me what's up? He insisted.

'It's ...' As she fiddled with her veil and prepared to speak, her voice quivered like the flickering clay-lamp. Even in the wavering light he could see tears sparkling in her eyes. He gazed swerved towards the door before coming to rest on the fireplace.

'Sonti's here, isn't?' There was a note of quiet confidence in his voice. His question seemed to put his wife at ease. Mopping her eyes with her veil, she nodded.

'The news of his son's return suffused Mahichandra's fatigued heart with a sense of overwhelming peace and joy. His son Sonti is the pride of the village. He had taken admission in the university after a brilliant academic performance at home. In spite of doing very well in his previous examinations he was not at all happy. Apparently frequent trips home last year had affected his studies. Now, after a gap of almost nine months, he was home!'

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'His papers ...?' Mahichandra asked, somewhat anxiously.

'They went off well, she said ... he must have worked really hard. He has lost lot of weight!'

'Where is he? Why hasn't he spoken to me as yet? ... I must go to him.' The father grew restless.

'Please ... he's fast asleep. He hasn't even had a cup of tea. He said he would have dinner straightaway. The journey must have tired him. He has brought a couple of his friends along - they're sleeping, too.'

'Where are they from?'

'Somewhere near Gourisagar. They too have sat for their exams. They stay in the same hostel with our Baba. They'll leave early in the morning tomorrow ... so hurry up, these pigeons have to be killed. Try to get hold of Benga.

Pained by the sight of the capital pair thrashing about uncomfortably in the small basket, 'Mahichandra asked, 'Where have these pigeons come from ... at this time of the night? The basket looks familiar!

Lakhimi shrank visibly at the note of curiosity in her husband's voice. This was what she had been secretly dreading. How like father and son were they could not bring themselves to hurt a mere bird. Try to get someone else to do the job and they would raise the roof! To top it all, the pigeons were theirs, she would never hear the end of it.

'Where would I get pigeons from, at this time of the night? They are ours. The boys were ravenous and you were not around ...', in an attempt to defend herself, Lakhimi pretended to sound hurt and annoyed.

Her reply momentarily disarmed Mahichandra, of course - what could she have done? He recalled that Lakhimi had never laid hands on those pigeons except in very hard times, when she had tried to sell one or two of them.

'Okay, I'll go – But how will a pair of pigeons fill their bellies? We might not feel like having, but they are three young men ...'

'I had thought so as well, Benga's mother might be able to give you a pair or more. In that case, bring ours back.'

Her suggestion greatly appealed Mahichandra of course, the old woman would be able to help him. For the last twenty years Bogibai had managed to eke out a meagre existence by raising fish and fowl, selling fresh vegetables from her garden. She had seen better times. After fourteen years of marriage, on an elephant hunt with the Mahaldar, her husband Dharmakanta had disappeared without a trace. Some believed that he had been done in by a tusker, others that he had been fatally bitten by a cobra. There were still others who insisted that it was the grief over his childless state that had driven him away. Overnight, Bogibai's life had changed. A vulnerable young widow, she had to contend with unwelcome attentions. Mahichandra was



Imran Hussain (b.1966) is one of the very sensitive short story writers of his generation. His first short story collection Hudumdeo Aru Anyanya Galpa has been well received. He won the Katha Award in 1999 and 'Chandraprava Memorial Award' in 2001. He teaches Political Science at Sipajhar College.

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perhaps the only person who had tried to help her without an ulterior motive. But awkward gossip soon put an end to his attempts. In the end Bogitara had adopted her sister's son, a five-year-old half-wit. In the long, still nights she drew immense strength from the reassuring sound of the little boy's heartbeats. The young woman lost her high spirits, her lilting voice got husky and the years dragged on. Benga, however, remained a fool. He was hard of hearing, his speech was faulty and he was a glutton to the core. For a few scraps he is willing to work like a slave, a weakness people were quick to exploit. One would often come across the idiot labouring away in someone's yard or farm because he had been promised a meal of left-over rice.

Basket in hand, Mahichandra made his way towards Bogibai's house. The road was long and winding. He decided to cut across the football field.

Lakhimi waited till the glow of light from the torch had dwindled into a distant twinkle. As she gazed after him her spirits sank. Mahichandra seemed to have aged a good deal after his retirement. There was his asthma as well. A brisk walk left him gasping for breath, his heart pounding furiously. She had tried without success to get those pigeons killed before her husband returned. The clerk's son had told her bluntly to ask her son. Faroukh had a different excuse altogether – apparently it was inauspicious for a husband to indulge in such acts when his wife was with child. Lakhimi had to be content with his explanation – she herself religiously followed these social codes like others. Had either father or son been up to the job, Mahichandra would have been spared the trouble of wandering about in the chilly night. More importantly, would Benga be home?

Lakhimi's fears were not unfounded. As Mahichandra called out for Benga from the yard, Bagibai's harsh voice floated out of the hut, 'Benga's not in. who is that at this unearthly hour?'

'It's me, Bai,' Mahichandra spoke up hurriedly, cutting short the stream of abuses that were sure to follow.

The old woman's voice changed noticeably, 'Oh, it's you, Muhi, I am coming.'

After sometime Bogibai appeared at the doorway carrying a clay-lamp. Her lusterless eyes peered about affectionately for Mahichandra.

'Where's Benga?'

Following the sound of his voice, Bogibai could discern just about the familiar figure, 'He went to the town early in the morning. Do come in.'

'No, not today, if you don't mind. We have guest at home, you see. I had come to get these pigeons killed,' Mahichandra spoke up in brisk, busy tones, 'Why isn't Benga back yet? What business does he have in the town?' There was a note of irritation in his voice.

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'Khargeshwar was with him. They took a cartload of fish to the market. He should have been back in the evening though.'

Khargeshwar? Mahichandra was angry. The man had made a lot of money by dealing in fish. In town he would play cards with the fish-mongers, often gambling away the night. He had taken to drink nowadays and had once insulted Mahichandra at a meeting when he was sloshed. No one had dared to misbehave with Mahichandra before that. He still smarted from the insult and possibly he would never forget it.

'I wonder what trouble that drunk has landed our poor boy in.'

'I have been so worried,' the old woman sighed, 'I had asked him not to go but he never listens ... Kharga has apparently promised to take him to the movies.'

Unwilling to prolong the conversation, Mahichandra came straight to the point, 'Bai, could I have a pair of pigeons?'

The old woman set up a wail, 'Have pigeons? Wonderful I That too with Benga around? The pigeons I had reared with so much effort ... the other day I had gone to visit an ailing Bhedo. When I come back I found that the clod had killed and eaten almost all of them. I suppose there's one left, why don't you take that?'

She shuffled into the house. As Mahichandra waited in the darkness, uncertain as to what to do, she came back and held out the small, young pigeon towards him.

'Who are your guests at this hour?' She asked, a note of irritation in her voice.

'It's Sonti, and two of his friends, Bai.' Mahichandra noticed that the disheveled old woman's glum face seemed to light up at the sound of Sonti's name.

'The little darling. It is ages since I saw him. Ask him to call on me tomorrow.'

'Of course ... I'll let him know.' It was growing late. Mahichandra hurriedly fished out a ten-rupee note from his pocket and held it out towards the old lady.

For a few moments she stared at the note with dim eyes. When she spoke, it was in soft, quivering tones, 'I won't take money today Muhi. My grandson's come after a long time. Please don't mind – I could give you only one. If only Benga hadn't eaten them ...,' her voice broke. Mahichandra catching sight of her misty eyes in the feeble light, did not have the heart to insist. Promising to send Sonti over the next morning, he took his leave of the old woman.

Back on the roads thoughts of the problem at hand rushed back to him.

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Hoping to get the headman's domestic hands to do the job, he made his way to his house.

He had barely walked past the patch of forest near the old woman's house when the tinkle of a bicycle's bell reached him. Was it someone he knew? The darkness blocked his vision beyond a yard or two. Also it did not seem proper to shine his torch at the rider – whoever he might be. Unable to decide what to do, Mahichandra stepped aside, The rider, however, put an end to his curiosity by dismounting from his bicycle.

'Where are you going, Sir?'

'Who is that? It is too ...' The walk had tired him and he panted for breath.

'It's me, Tirtha, Sir.'

'Oh, Tirtha, I am so glad I met you. I have been out looking for Benga ... these pigeons ... you see. But he was not home. He went to town early in the morning ...'

Tirtha cut him short, almost shouting out his words, Isn't he back, Sir? There's been trouble in the town.'

'What do you mean?' Fear and surprise jostled in his voice. It was as if trouble was not unknown to him.

Tirtha drew closer and dropped his voice, 'the terrorists shot down some army officer. Apparently he was out shopping with his wife. She was hurt, too. Their little boy barely escaped with his life.'

The news of the murder deeply agitated Mahichandra's peace loving soul. What was the officer's fault – the fact that he worked in the army? His son could have been hurt. His thoughts strayed to the unknown child and he grew anxious. A face of a child began to take shape before Mahichandra's eyes. The blurred outlines assumed familiar proportions – a faded black and white snapshot of a crying Sonti in the family album seemed to stare at him.

'Sir !'

'Oh, are you leaving?' The sound of his former student's voice jerked him back to reality. For a few moments he stared at him helplessly. Then shining his torch on the bicycle he spoke in a voice that was as much a plea as a command, 'Why don't you kill these pigeons for me? I would rather not go ahead. It's so cold.'

Excitement over the murder in town had been bubbling within Tirtha. Mahichandra's request distracted him. He relished pigeons but found his stomach churning when he had to kill them. When required to do so his younger brother would come to his rescue. The sight of Mahichandra eagerly leaning towards him like a question mark pained Tirtha. Respect for his former teacher was responsible for the little quiver in his voice as he ventured hesitantly, 'Sir ... actually I ...'

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'What's up? Do you have any problems?' Mahichandra sounded extremely helpless.

Switching off his torch he looked hopefully at Tirtha, who was finding it extremely difficult to think of an explanation. He clutched at the straw offered by the innocuous question. The heavy curtain of darkness that had descended on them also made things much easier, 'It's something I can never myself do, Sir. I feel so sorry ... my brother can do it. He's quite a brat, Sir.'

The deep sigh wading out of the darkness disturbed Tirtha, Mahichandra's warm breath seemed to slide over his hand resting on the handle-bar of the bicycle.

'In that case it's okay ... Let me go to the headman's house.' His voice quivered in indignation; towards the end, however, it grew poignant.

'Do you mind, Sir?' surprisingly, Tirtha sounded twice as hurt.

Once upon a time Tirtha was Mahichandra's favourite student. The helplessness in his voice touched the father in him. 'No, not at all. My boy's no different, nor am I. Would I have otherwise in this cold ...'

'Hur ... hur ... hut ... hut ...'

The sound of someone shouting at his cows broke into their conversation. Who was the cowherd? As he drew nearer Mahichandra switched on his torch and asked, 'Who is that?'

'Isn't that Muhikai? Where are you off to, basket in hand?' the booming, warm voice gave away the speaker – Rajanikanta Barua. Barua was a man full of life, four or five years younger than Mahichandra. However, both of them had grown old now. From time to time, they would share a joke.

"I have been looking for you. Why have you taken to herding cows at this hour? Mahichandra attempted to match his light heartedness.

'Let's not talk about it ... I bought this cow a couple of days back. The problem is, she would rather not stay at home. Makes straight for her old master's house the moment she gets a chance. I discovered a few minutes ago that she was not in the cowshed. The boy's away – he is staying at his uncle's. I had to drag my old body out. Thankfully, Motiram had found her and tied her up. I would have lost her otherwise ...' He noticed on in an easier baritone. Flashing his torch on the basket, he joked 'wonderful, should I invite myself over?'

'You are welcome. But you'll have to help me to kill them.' Though Mahichandra responded lightly, he meant to corner him.

'I'd rather not go, in that case,' guffawing, Barua made as if to go.

'Wait a minute, Where do you think you are going?' Mahichandra rebuked him mildly, 'kill these birds for me before you go. We have guests today and I've been looking for someone to help me out for quite some time. Tirtha can take care of your cow.'

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'Why are my services required when there is a young man around, Mahikai?

'Would I ask you if Tirtha could do it?' He feels sorry for the birds, it seems.'

'Sorry? Tirtha, young men today have no qualms about taking human lives. Even today, there was a murder in the town,' Rajanikanta rebuked Tirtha lightly. Then changing his tone he turned to Mahichandra – Muhikai, I was only joking. I was initiated during the last *tithi.* I can't carry on with such things. The cow's been troubling me. Let me take my leave of you. Please don't mind. Why don't you catch hold of Benga?'

Bringing his stick down on the restless animal's back, Barua moved on.

The air which had rung with laughter a few moments ago grew dense and gloomy once more. Looking at Barua's receding back, Mahichandra spoke in slow, quiet tones, 'You'd better go too, Tirtha, times are bad, your parents might worry.'

Tirtha blamed his soft heart for his teacher's predicament. Guilty and embarrassed, he felt like dying in shame. Hesitantly he mounted his cycle. Tirtha's old battered cycle groaned its way over the uneven roads. Behind it followed Mahichandra's old battered body.

The headman's house lay beyond the turning ahead. Mahichandra was confident that help lay there. The night had deepened. The boys would be famished, his wife would be worried. Thoughts such as these made him quicken his pace. But, tired and hungry, he found it difficult to keep up the pace. Near the turning, he was seized by a severe fit of coughing. He suddenly felt ill and sat down on the road. He recovered after some time but felt terribly angry with himself. His anger suddenly turned on the birds. It goes about badgering the whole world. Restlessly he picked out the solitary pigeon from the basket. However the warm, white body and those tiny, appealing eyes, as usual moved him. With the same nervous gestureshe replaced the pigeon in the basket. Switching off the torch he rose to his feet.

The village was plunged in the inky darkness of the moonless night except for a few twinkling lights in the distant huts. The dense woods, the bamboo patches and the stillness all around deepened the sense of lurking danger. In the haunting silence of the night, Mahichandra was engulfed by a sudden sense of loneliness.

Suddenly a bird flapped out of the clump of bamboos near by, startling him. The night seemed to have thickened and poured itself into that particular patch. Mahichandra was familiar with this route, since he always took it on his way back from the headman's. Yet a nameless dread sent shivers up his spine. There was a rustle of dead leaves and suddenly the sound of weeping – strange, muffled exploded the night's silence. Mahichandra pretended to cough and stepping back, asked in low, scared tones, 'Who's that?'

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The weeping stopped and in answer to his question, the leaves seemed to rustle again, Summoning up his courage, Mahichandra shone his torch at the roots of the trees. He startled in surprise, Benga was sitting hunched under the tree, weeping silently — and how heart-rending and how muted were those sobs! Mahichandra was momentarily unnerved, then he stepped forward. There were clots of blood on his nose and mouth, fast turning black. There was a gash in his forehead and his face seemed abnormally swollen. Widening his eyes with an effort, Benga stared uncomprehending, at the bright light of the torch. Then he let out a shrill cry and broke in to a run, disappearing into the darkness.

His behaviour took Mahichandra by surprise. The whole incident seemed like a nightmare to him. What was wrong with Benga? Had someone hurt him? Why did he run away? Had the light on his face prevented Benga from recognizing him? A number of questions swirled in Mahichandra's head. Walking as if in sleep, he reached the headman's house before he realised it.

There was a large crowd in the headman's courtyard. Squatting round the fire, they were talking in loud whispers. The whispering abated as they caught sight of him.

The headman, struck by the worried, unhappy expression on Mahichandra's face, gently pushed forward a stool, 'Is anything wrong, *master*? So worked up and at this time of the night, too ... I am glad you came anyway. I was thinking about you only!'

'Wrong is the word, I have been looking for a long time for someone to help me kill these pigeons. Everyone seems to have some problem or the other. I went to Benga first, only to hear that he had gone to the town. I ran into him some time back in the thicket of bamboos ...'

'What one may say ... The army thrashed the innocent boy rather cruelly. They dare to lord it over us poor villagers. Khargeshwar was there. He told us the whole story. Have you heard of today's incident?'

'Yes, I got to know of it not long ago. But how did Benga get mixed up in all these? Mahichandra grew impatient.

Before the headman could respond, from the crowd Jeeban craned his neck and spoke up in a low voice.' He is priceless, Sir. After the incident took place, people scattered from the site. But the idiot stood his ground. Apparently they talked to him in Hindi. He had a hard time trying to speak in Assamese. How could he possibly reply in Hindi? That proved to be his doom. It seems they hit him with the butts of their guns and, kicked him with boots. I suppose they let him go when they realized that he is a half-wit.'

Mahichandra shuddered at their words, scenes of the army assaulting Benga came to life before his eyes. He could see the butts of their guns knocking Benga off his feet, their boots pounding at him. Their foul abuses, Benga's

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screams, even his quick, unsteady breathing seemed to ring in Mahichandra's ears. And he spoke up before he could help himself. 'How can they attack their brothers in this fashion? If they had kept at it they might have killed him. Where were our revolutionaries then? They take to their heels after carrying out their work, leaving us the poor villagers to suffer.' Of late Mahichandra had grown increasingly disapproving of the acts of mindless violence perpetrated by the terrorist group. His anger now turned on those boys. Pushing away the stool he got unsteadily to his feet.

'Do sit down master. Where are you going I would like to have a talk with you,' shifting his weight to his knees the headman rose. The crowd suddenly seemed wary. Mysterious yet significant glances were exchanged.

'I'd rather not sit down. Call someone – I'd like to get these pigeons killed. We have guests at home.'

'Just a minute. Gohin has gone to gather firewood, he'll be here in a moment. In the meantime, let's have a talk,' In a rather intimate gesture, the headman took him aside.

'What is it? Can you be quick about it?' Mahichandra pressed.

The headman seemed to be at a loss for words and stared at him rather helplessly.

'Why don't you speak up?' Mahichandra was irritated.

'You see ... give those boys from the organization a meal and get rid of them. The army might descend on us at any moment,' Anxiety and fear mingled in the headman's voice.

Mahichandra flew into a temper. Times were so bad that guests wishing to stay the night were often taken for fugitive members of the organization. Such things, of course were not unheard of in the village. With great patience Mahichandra tried to dispel his friend's fear, 'It's only Sonti and his two friends.'

'It is quite sometime since your son joined the organization, Master, the headman said in a soft, almost inaudible voice.

'What do you mean?' In disbelief and shock Mahichandra's voice rose to a high pitched shriek. Sonti was the pride of the village. In the entire neighbourhood it was hard to find such a quiet and well-behaved boy. A young man now, he had never given anyone reason to complain, Mahichandra stared at the headman, thunderstruck.

Minutes ticked by in uncomfortable silence before the headman picked up form where he had left off, continuing in slow, hesitant tones, 'I have heard vague rumours for some time, since Sonti was involved in the incident today. We had to tell you.'

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The words burned Mahichandra's ears like hot lead. The familiar ring of sincerity in them however was not lost in him. This could not be a concocted tale.

'Who told you that? Tell me, where did you hear it?' He cried out in a strange, choked voice.

His reaction unnerved the headman. Though reluctant to reveal his source he found his resistance crumbling. His childhood friend was a picture of despair. Lowering his head like a man in the dock he said, 'The idiot was around when the shooting took place. It seems he saw Sonti with the extremists. On his way back he told Khargeswar ... Khargeswar was here, you see ... of course its credibility ... The headman fumbled for words.

Khargeswar's name opened old wounds. The momentary loss of faith in his son gave way to suspicion of an ugly conspiracy. Hot waves ran through his spine and losing all control over himself, he cried. 'Now I see, it's all Khargeswar's doing. Rogue! Scoundrel wouldn't he enjoy trapping Sonti under the TADA! How could you believe that drunk? Whatever else my son might be guilty of, he would never commit murder. I can assure you of that. I am leaving.' Draping his shawl around himself rather unsteadily, Mahichandra stormed out.

The headman was embarrassed by Mahichandra's stinging retorts. He was right — How could one go by what the drunk said? He might have made it up all. Further, how could one depend on the idiot? Wander what he had seen or heard! What had Khargeswar made of it? He began to doubt the incident's veracity. But he did not dare to call after Mahichandra. As his unsteady steps faded into the distance, there was a temporary lull in the courtyard. The next moment there was a murmur of conversation.

There was a murmur in Mahichandra's heart as well — of trust and suspicion. Had Sonti really joined the organization? He was very impulsive. One could not be sure. Out of his village maybe he had been sucked into the organization. But no, a timid, quiet boy like him could never behave like a butcher. Why did Khargeswar say that? Old enmities? Anxiety and dread gnawed at his heart.

Uneasy thought nagging at him, he managed to find his way home. Lakhimi was still waiting near the gate. She cried out as soon as he saw him 'you've been so late. Sonti's dying to see you. He has been fretting because I sent you out into the night ...

Mahichandra walked in with tired steps without replying. Putting his basket down in a corner he asked quietly, 'Where's Sonti?'

'Right here. He had been waiting for you outside. Then he decided that he would go out to look for you and went in to change.'

At her words Mahichandra softened. It is ages since he had seen his son.

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Suddenly he longed to catch a glimpse of his son and turned longing eyes on the door of the living room. Reading his mind Lakhimi moved forward. Turning up the wick of the lamp she called out. 'Sonti, *Deuta*'s here.'

At his mother's call an excited and bare backed Sonti ran out. Evidently he had been changing. He had lost a lot of weight. A couple of boys, equally emaciated, followed him.

After touching his father's feet Sonti, stricken by the pale tired expression on his father's face, cried out in injured tones, 'Why did you have to go out Deuta, when you were not feeling well? Couldn't we have settled for rice and dal today?'

Mahichandra was gradually feeling ill. Trying to smile, he replied, 'It's going to be rice and dal. We have no choice. I could not get these pigeons killed, though I really tried ...' He was racked by fit of coughing. The cough swelled in his chest. Lakhimi ran up to him and began to massage his chest.

Sonti looked at his mother. 'Look at the way he is coughing. Why did he have to go out in the cold? *Deuta* will never change. I should have killed those pigeons as well. He need not have gone around knocking on all those doors.' Saying so he began to look for the basket. Spotting it in the corner, he brought it to the center of the yard. Fishing out the pigeons, he proceeded to wring their necks one after another. Before Mahichandra's eyes the dead pigeons dropped to the ground one by one. In the feeble light of the lamp Sonti's eyes appeared to glow with a strange fire. Mahichandra felt his head throb viciously. In a daze he stared at those alien, bloodshot eyes. ❑

Translated by Ms. Atreyee Gohain



Ms. Atreyee Gohain (b.1975). An M.A. in English from Delhi University, Ms. Gohain worked with the Rupa Publishing House two and a half years. She also edited JETWINGS Journal for one year. A good translator, she now lives in America.

Translator's Note :

In keeping with the milieu story is immersed in, the narrational style is simple, marked by an absence of literary ornateness. The easy flow of the narrative was somewhat difficult to capture in the translation – in the speech patterns in particular. The original title **Jighansha** also posed problems. In Assamese Jighansha means an intention to kill. In a straightforward literary translation much of the dramatic impact is lost. After conferring with the author, a new title was adopted for the translated version.

Notes :

1. Benga – A word used for a dunce in the village of Assam. It has an undercurrent of fondness or affection.
2. Bai – Term of respect for an elder woman who is seen in a sisterly light.
3. Kai – A term of respect for a elderly man who is seen in a brotherly light.
4. Tithi – An auspicious day, in this case it is related to either the birthday or death anniversary of the celebrated Assamese saint Sankardeva.
5. Master – Generally in rural Assam, a teacher is respectfully addressed as Master.
6. Deuta – Deuta is the the Assamese word for father.

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the first assamese sonnet

priyatomar chithi



Hemchandra Goswami

the beloved's letter

Loosening the covers off beauty's breast
at nature's private chamber I glower,
In this hand ungainly as a crow's nest,
the honey there is there is none better.
Many a verse in the poet's bower may bloom,
and waft about on earth in the vernal breeze,
but the songs that in your letter loom
no poetry can claim it ever sees.
Flowers blossom, wilt and fall, the turf goes dry;
Your letter, honey, what miracle works,
The first sprouts of spring wilting lie -
It never grows stale, but fresh flowers invokes.
I sniff it and kiss it, but will never tire,
instead in my heart glows the star of desire.

Translated by Pradip Acharya

[Poet and historian, **Hemchandra Goswami** (b.1872 - d.1928) is one of the the celebrated trio of the *Jonaki* Jug of Assamese literature. Goswami blazed a trail in Assamese poetry by introducing sonnet with remarkable success with its typical love theme. Imbued with the romantic quest for beauty in nature, Goswami composed *Priyatomar Chithi*, the first Assamese sonnet, which is marked by the spontaneity of diction and imagery, and an uninhibited expression of personal love and optimistic longing for the beloved. Such a poetic voice was never appreciated by the medieval society of Assam.

Prof. Pradip Acharya, one of our best translators, has made a brilliant attempt to capture the spirit, rhythm and charm of *Priyatomar Chithi* in the English translation rendered in the Shakespearian sonnet form.]

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delving into the psyche of a people-
the assamese mind

The Assamese Mind
Understanding Through Reimagination

'Assam must not lose its soul. It must uphold it against the whole world. Else, I will say Assam has only manikins and no men.'

– Mahatma Gandhi

(commenting on the proposed grouping of Assam with Bengal under the Cabinet Mission Plan.)

'The cloth woven by the weaver has covered the whole world, and yet the weaver goes bare-bodied...'

– Popular Assamese folk ballad

The above expressions, cited from varied sources across the timeline, stir something deep inside the Assamese mind, as they resonate in a powerful way the two dominant undercurrents in the Assamese Psyche. (He is today disenchanted with himself as well as with the 'world outside'.) The Assamese experience today the despair, the dreams, the struggles faced by so many other people caught in a pervasive, adverse socio-historical reality.

PART-I

Alienation from the soil: THE ROOT:

Right from the days of the veteran Ambikagiri Roy Choudhuri, Assamese intelligentsia has been asserting the need to protect and retain control over the *bazaar* and *pathar* (the market and the land) in order to retain a homeland and an honourable existence.(Baruah A.K., 2005). Alienation of the land can be recognised as the root cause of all forms of alienation confronting the region. However, as it is evident from the north-eastern case, the movements concerning land rights with all their ramifications often become a significant bargaining platform for the vari-

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ous communities and ethnic groups, elite and middle classes for pursuing competing claims for resource mobilisation vis-a-vis other communities or the state and thus further strengthens its hegemonic position in their respective society. But one cannot deny the substantive and radical nature of the demands put to the floor by the claims of land rights culminating over the years in various forms of protest, inside as well as outside the parameters of the Indian Constitution and this issue remains the most touchy one and continues to be the most effective as well as sensitive rallying point for a large-scale mass movement in the region.

Three main factors can be pointed out, which have resulted in substantial land alienation and a consequent threat perception over the years. The first is an outmoded land policy that comes as a colonial legacy, Second, the introduction and continuation of insensitive development policies, and the third, the unchecked immigration. The colonial rule unleashed a systematic onslaught on the Indian social structure. All agricultural and forestland of the country were brought under the control of the colonial administration. Relatively isolated tribal habitats were encroached upon in the process. The non-tribals started penetrating the forest and hill areas to exploit economic resources, thereby undermining the traditional economy and society of the tribals.

Assam also underwent the onslaught of the new land policy of the British. Assam's problem was even more acute than the mainland India due to the fact that unlike the latter the state was still not adequately introduced to a cash economy. So both the tribal and non-tribal populations of the state experienced the pangs of the new land revenue policy of the colonial administration. The backward socio-economic structure of the state was torn asunder especially by the introduction of a plantation economy in the state in the very third decade of the 19th century. The best plots of fallow land of the state were handed over to the British planters in a brazen display of neglect of the socio-economic interest of the people of the state also tracts of land belonging to the peasantry were often encroached upon by the planters. Inter-village communication also suffered disjunction in the face of the aggrandising policy of the planters. All these had the direct blessing of the colonial administration. Besides, forest land and forest products on which both the tribal and the non-tribal peasantry depended heavily for their sustenance were also brought under the total control of the government. Within a very short span of time, all these left, the traditional economic life of the people in a state of total disarray. The consequence was a surge of anger which found its expression in the long-drawn peasant upsurge in the areas of central and lower Assam in the later half of the 19th century.

This is ostensibly in order to wrest this process of displacement and land alienation among the tribals that the provisions for reserved tribal areas were adopted by the then colonial administration. The first such effort could be found in the 'Line System' introduced first in the erstwhile Nagaon district and the Barpeta subdivision of the erstwhile Kamrup district in 1920. But this system collapsed under the relentless advance of land-hungry immigrants. However, what is of most concern is that the government itself as an institution has been deeply engaged in violating the spirit of its own tribal land policy. Each and every govern-

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delving into the psyche of a people- the assamese mind

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Alienation from the soil: THE ROOT:

Right from the days of the veteran Ambikagiri Roy Choudhuri, Assamese intelligentsia has been asserting the need to protect and retain control over the *bazaar* and *pathar* (the market and the land) in order to retain a homeland and an honourable existence.(Baruah A.K., 2005). Alienation of the land can be recognised as the root cause of all forms of alienation confronting the region. However, as it is evident from the north-eastern case, the movements concerning land rights with all their ramifications often become a significant bargaining platform for the vari-

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ous communities and ethnic groups, elite and middle classes for pursuing competing claims for resource mobilisation vis-a-vis other communities or the state and thus further strengthens its hegemonic position in their respective society. But one cannot deny the substantive and radical nature of the demands put to the floor by the claims of land rights culminating over the years in various forms of protest, inside as well as outside the parameters of the Indian Constitution and this issue remains the most touchy one and continues to be the most effective as well as sensitive rallying point for a large-scale mass movement in the region.

Three main factors can be pointed out, which have resulted in substantial land alienation and a consequent threat perception over the years. The first is an outmoded land policy that comes as a colonial legacy, Second, the introduction and continuation of insensitive development policies, and the third, the unchecked immigration. The colonial rule unleashed a systematic onslaught on the Indian social structure. All agricultural and forestland of the country were brought under the control of the colonial administration. Relatively isolated tribal habitats were encroached upon in the process. The non-tribals started penetrating the forest and hill areas to exploit economic resources, thereby undermining the traditional economy and society of the tribals.

Assam also underwent the onslaught of the new land policy of the British. Assam's problem was even more acute than the mainland India due to the fact that unlike the latter the state was still not adequately introduced to a cash economy. So both the tribal and non-tribal populations of the state experienced the pangs of the new land revenue policy of the colonial administration. The backward socio-economic structure of the state was torn asunder especially by the introduction of a plantation economy in the state in the very third decade of the 19th century. The best plots of fallow land of the state were handed over to the British planters in a brazen display of neglect of the socio-economic interest of the people of the state also tracts of land belonging to the peasantry were often encroached upon by the planters. Inter-village communication also suffered disjunction in the face of the aggrandising policy of the planters. All these had the direct blessing of the colonial administration. Besides, forest land and forest products on which both the tribal and the non-tribal peasantry depended heavily for their sustenance were also brought under the total control of the government. Within a very short span of time, all these left, the traditional economic life of the people in a state of total disarray. The consequence was a surge of anger which found its expression in the long-drawn peasant upsurge in the areas of central and lower Assam in the later half of the 19th century.

This is ostensibly in order to wrest this process of displacement and land alienation among the tribals that the provisions for reserved tribal areas were adopted by the then colonial administration. The first such effort could be found in the 'Line System' introduced first in the erstwhile Nagaon district and the Barpeta subdivision of the erstwhile Kamrup district in 1920. But this system collapsed under the relentless advance of land-hungry immigrants. However, what is of most concern is that the government itself as an institution has been deeply engaged in violating the spirit of its own tribal land policy. Each and every govern-

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ment in post-independence Assam has been following the practice of acquisition of tribal land in the name of development. The government acquires tribal land for construction of railway and road transport, setting up of industrial and irrigation complexes, construction of dams, and so on.

All these factors compelled the tribal population in many areas of Assam to migrate into remoter areas, especially forest reserves and submerged areas leaving behind their normal habitats. Over the last 40 years or so, a huge section of the Bodo peasantry, the worst victim of the government land policy, has migrated to newer areas like the eastern part of the river Suwansiri, Gohpur in the Sonitpur district, the Lakhimpur district, the Daiyang forest reserve of the Golaghat district, the Karbi Anglong district, and so on. Protection of our forest cover is undoubtedly important. Today, however, it has become customary to put the onus squarely on the tribals for the depletion of our forest cover. No one cares to enquire critically what have actually caused the progressive shrinkage of forestry in Assam (till 20 years back Assam had the highest percentage of forest cover in the country). We seem to be unmindful of the devastating role played by the external migrants, contractors, forest officials, political leaders and big industrial houses in the spoilation of our forestry under the burden of government propaganda.This indifference cannot be better exemplified than the government's attitude towards encroachment of tribal land by numerous tea plantations of Assam. In fact, successive governments have turned a deaf ear to all reminders and protests against this design of the plantations. On the contrary, the government is doing every bit to facilitate the success of the land-grabbing ventures of the plantations apart from having leased them out land at most friendly terms. This scenario prompts one to suggest that only by establishing community control over the land eventually land alienation can be stopped. The power to grant land for any purpose to anybody should go from the government to the community and this process has to be governed by a set of humane and locally sensitized laws. The state led model of development has to be radically altered; in a practical way land for development will always be needed, but in this regard the community and not the state should be the authorising body. In a populous, multiethnic and multicultural country, we cannot but rethink the present land policy.



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In present times we should try to reenact the spirit of the community, albeit overcoming the almost insurmountable castiest-ethnic prejudices of the past. However, this proposition immediately raises a few complications. The paramount question arises: What do we understand by the concept of the community and the various ethnic movements propelled by it? Can they really speak on behalf of the people they claim to represent? And then of course there is the much apparent case for a 'security dilemma' resulting in inter-community clashes. Also there is the very pertinent question about the nature and requirements of development itself that is often communally inter-dependent.

First and foremost, one has to take cognizance of the fact that ethnic movements spring out of a background of systematic socio-economic exploitation and oppression, and is far from an automatic and abrupt expression of a metaphysical ethnic essence.(Gohain 2001).

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It is wrong to discuss present-day ethnicity in a socio-political vacuum, for a fuller understanding it must be placed in its socio-political context. As it can be observed in the case of Assam as elsewhere that Imperialism brought isolated, self-contained communities into contact with a distorted modern reality, a mainstream modernity shaped by imperialism on the basis of feudal remnants. As a consequence of this 'forced' assimilation the natural subsistence economies of the people got severely damaged and the communities entered into hitherto unknown types of human relations of a larger and more complex social order. Therefore, in a certain sense the ethnic discourse is a revolt against the discourse of modernity albeit the distorted modernity it comes into contact with, though in itself it is touched with modernity in many ways. However, going by its performance one gets the feeling that the post-colonial state in India, buckling under the pressure from colonial-feudal remnants has not done the adequate enough to dispel the insecurity and discomfort in the people. Acting at the behest of the 'dominant coalition' (Prof. Pranab Bardhan proposes that the state in India is driven by the concern of furthering the interest and mediating the conflict of the dominant coalition (consisting of the industrial capitalist class, rich peasants and professionals.) See Bardhan: 1983) the state seems reluctant to share any substantial power with the subaltern groups. Ethnic movement and militancy are a product of this situation, and their undesirable aspects should not overshadow their genesis in injustice and oppression. However, while rejecting the essentialism in modernity, the ethnic movements forwards its own variety of it. By pushing for the most exclusive and insular identity agenda that often goes against the geographic and demographic realities they thus emphasize on a irrational revivalism, where legitimate pride in heritage mingles with uncritical and blind worship of the past, impeding real growth. Thus, under the banner of pluralism it provides ground for a form of aggressive nationalism.

Thus one has to put these struggles in a correct historical-socio-economical framework situation so as to correctly locate the source of oppression and which can help link up struggle of the nationality/ethnicity with struggles against caste, gender, class exploitation. It is the autonomy and interconnections of these struggles, which have to be simultaneously woven into theory and practised. Contemporary social science discourse must make some innovative advance in discovering these interconnections and emphasizing the multi-dimensionality of liberation. (See Mohanty :1996).

IDENTITY AND IMMIGRATION UNDER CHANGING PARADIGMS:

The onslaught of immigration on Assam has been two-pronged – intra-territorial and extra-territorial. However, this distinction, in real, effect seems more conceptual than practical as we will see in real geopolitics; political economy speaks louder than political geography. Indeed the much fanfare following the repeal of the IM(D)T act has to endure this hard fact of real politique.

Since the days of British colonialism there has been an multi-layered expansion of the phenomenon of immigration so much so that today it adds a new dimension to the indigenous Assamese–neo-Assamese–plains tribe equation in the state. It is

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significant that 'while on the one hand the parameters of the Assamese identity is expanding to include the immigrants, the tea tribes and even the Nepalese, on the other hand, the alienation of the plains tribal seems complete. With more and more immigrant Muslims joining the Assamese community, this alienation which is intricately related to the land issue is bound to grow further...if the demographic content is further upset, then what may be termed as the regional identity of the Assamese people comprising the indigenous Assamese, plains tribes, Assamese and neo-Assamese Muslims, tea-tribes, and even Nepalese, may eventually be replaced by a 'civilisational' identity. (Misra 2001).

However, this crisis raises the larger issue of impact of intra-territorial population mobility on ethnic cultures. Federal arrangement might facilitate interaction across a federation, but in the process cannot be allowed to cripple local autonomy in the name of some abstract universalistic principle. Here one tends to agree with Michael Walzer that there cannot be any community without a minimum right of closure. (Walzer 1970, p.220)

The state in India has evidently failed in resolving or even meaningfully addressing the issue of the crisis of Assamese identity that perceives a strong threat in the face of the deteriorating precarious ethno-political balance in the state. It is mainly due to unchecked influx of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants as well also due to a steady inflow of settlers from other states, primarily as a result of a pan-Indian market expansion. Indeed, the state is arguably, exploiting the phenomenon to break down the land based tribal movements for self-determination in the region, at the same time cashing on this cultural paranoia in pushing its nationalistic agenda forward by putting diverse cultural groups against each other. However, considering practical expediency and with a humanitarian understanding appeal is made by many quarters for a pragmatic as well sensitive solution of the crisis in the form of issuing of residential and work permit along with travelling and re-entry permits for the same period to all the foreigners irrespective of their country of origin after detecting and registering them. These people must be divested of voting rights at the elections to state assembly and parliament but may even be allowed civic rights at the local level. They may be provided reasonable civic amenities, their rights may be protected by suitable legislation and part of their income may be allowed to be repatriated to their families' back home. Such a humane, practical and profitable policy will ensure that the poor of our neighbouring countries are not uprooted and don't disrupt the social-demographic fabric of other societies in an unaccepted manner. (see Hazarika.,2000.....Bora:1995).

This call for critical administrative measures charged by people's aspirations that can come only through a correct understanding by the state of the social realities and sensitivities of the region. This takes me to the second part of my paper.

PART-II

REDEFINING THE PERIPHERY:

Perhaps the state has been the most influential external force on ethnic groups and ethnicity in modern times. The state is, however, more than a force influencing

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the social process that encompasses different ethnic groups. It is also a resource for which ethnic groups compete. However in general the behavior of the state towards the ethno-cultural-political demands has been more in keeping with the assessment that 'state actions take forms that attempt to reinforce the authority, political longevity, and social control of the state organization, while incumbents generate the relevant policies or policy ideas.' (Alfred and Parekh,1988).

From this treatment towards the issues of peripheral cultural identities, we can broadly conceptualize that the federal arrangements, such as in India, serve primarily the need of the administration rather than as expression of identities. Consideration of identities, except that of the nation, gets subdued under a privilege to the equality of rights, or the way to give them consideration is by making them synonymous with the regime of rights. 'Politics with these attributes have led to the marginalisation of communities and identities that are not in tune with them. The knowledge expressed in the nation-state and its institutions are privileged over the understanding of the communities as knowledge versus falsehood and truth versus prejudice respectively... Where the understanding of the state has run into troubled waters with the self understanding of communities, the state, by privileging its understanding, has attempted to suppress the expressions of communities, if it has not succeeded in subordinating them.' (Rodrigues 2002, p.125-126).

We have to understand that in countries like India identities have asserted themselves inspite of attempts to delegitimize them for reasons of the nation state. In fact, the nation state has tried to deny these identity claims equal contending space by shoving them off to the electoral arena, where they are often put in a terrible disadvantage. In fact, Assam is a classic example of how to counteract their electoral absorption and to assert their autonomous identity, communities have explored beyond the state institutional arrangements and have launched armed struggles.

The much-cherished value of the community is considerably decreasing as a predominating alliance between the local, community elite with the global capital is challenging its authenticity. However, at the same time the prowess of the institution of the state is also under siege from the same forces of imperialist globalization. When corporate ballrooms have become the citadels of 'national' policy making, the issue of sensitive, pro-active state policies becomes a complicated one, if not a thing totally abandoned. To bring the contending identities to the level of a dialogue, which will eventually facilitate a greater mutual understanding and respect between these diverse cultural claims, we must relink the state with the community. But for this the Indian state itself has first to disclaim a particular notion of identity vis-a-vis some other identities and in the process we will have to redefine the contours of both the state and the community.

POLITICS WITH NEW IMAGINATIONS?

A central question that is increasingly at the root of the disconnection between the vision and agendas of the Indian state and what animates the persistent politics of militancy in the north-east – and the complicity of segments of mainstream politi-

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cians and civil society with it – is whether the control over land, resources, ideas and people would remain in the hands of the peoples of the region or would they pass on to the control of the institutions of the Indian state which privileges the pan-Indian, 'market' point of view at the expense of the regional one.

The government, because of its double-speak, has not been able to send the right signals for a negotiated settlement. While on the one hand, it has been insisting on a dialogue with the militants, on the other hand, it seems to be going ahead with its policy of exterminating the ultras as a terrorising tactic. People expect more innovation and flexibility on the part of the state's political imagination, which can at least make a positive beginning of a short, breaking the deadlock over technical issues.

It needs to be noted that when the state fails as the principal agent of socio-economic transformation and cannot ensure distributive justice to its citizens, it tends to become increasingly coercive. Therefore, in order to understand the roots of militant violence in this region and to seek ways and means to resolve it through dialogue, one must consider the failure of the state to ensure socio-economic justice especially in the peripheral regions of the union and its emergence as an instrument of repression. This repression is to be seen not only in relation to militancy but becomes a common feature of the everyday life of the citizen. In many insurgency affected areas, the state has emerged as the major violator of human rights and some time back the home minister even talked of granting amnesty to military personnel found guilty of human rights violations in these areas which are already covered by draconian laws like the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act and the Disturbed Areas Act and which give the security forces virtual power of life and death over civilians. One has to remember that militant violence, notwithstanding its unpleasant sides, is quite often the result of the failure of the state on the socio-economic front and that it must be seen as a political issue which must be resolved ultimately not through repression but by dialogue.

The government of India has defined the problem it faces in the north-east, very a-historically and unimaginatively, as one of insurgency and economic under-development. Counter-insurgency operations and a push for development are the two prongs of New Delhi's crude north-east policy. While the tight-lipped doctrines of 'national security' crushes nascent popular movements, throttles an incipient civil society, social prejudices continues unabated through incidents like 'punishment posting ' of maligned government officials including high-court judges to this region.

However, much imagination has opened up with the strong surfacing of the doctrine of NEW REGIONALISM, where regions are perceived as a key level of governance, innovation and policy making as national economies adjusts to the changed realities under the pressure of neo-liberal globalisation. It is true that owing to its particular historical ties and geo-political location the north-eastern region has a potentiality to enter the global market through its east door but it has to be a very sensibly regulated entry not simply because the market is always with

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the market-dominant minority but also wider integration without internal structural adjustment might jolt the foundation of the traditional regional economy making it a pray for market hungry global capital.

As it is argued, improved infrastructure will not automatically guarantee that the peoples of northeast India will benefit from it. For one thing, improved infrastructure may lead to a loss of 'natural protection' for local producers, as lower transport costs and improved information flows lead to increased competition from national and international suppliers. While consumers may benefit from this process, the 'adjustment costs' should not be underestimated. Improved infrastructure may just as easily lead to resource outflows as to inflows. While this uncertainty is not an argument for not investing in infrastructure, such investment decisions should clearly be based on their 'social rates of return'; it cannot be assumed that they would automatically improve regional outcomes. In this regard also crucial is to ponder about the issue of free mobility of labour which can either ways impact the economy of the over all region in a big way. (See Baruah, 2002)

However, as of now as always, the thrust of India's policy towards the north-east seems to be to de-link the institutions of the state from the local societies of the region as much as possible. Going in an insensitive manner about its various 'plans' and 'developmental projects' sidelining local needs and sensibilities, the state govt. playing a mute spectator or worse an eager collaborator, be it the recent case of popular protest over hazardous construction of the 'Bogibill' bridge over the Brahmaputra or the rampant destruction of the precious Dibru-Chaikhua rain-forests by the MNC Premier Oil.

I would like to conclude my paper by stating that the nations and states are historical constructs and are always in the dynamic process of becoming and unbecoming. Unions are formed at the stroke of history at a particular politico-economic juncture, under able leadership. History also stands by the solemn truth that will and not the force can be the basis of a state. Therefore, efforts consistently have to be made in order to evolve democratic modes of participation and the union has to be refashioned time and again in order to respond to the positive demands and popular aspirations of the units. A multi-layered federal structure with degrees of power sharing at various levels allows a number of possibilities, which have to be considered. But most crucially, formal institutional structures has to be backed by substantive socio-economic transformation and cultural rights. A fruitful dialogue on the north-east has to be in a way a dialogue with the 'self', where freeing herself from all prejudice/ biases or pre-conceptions, one gets a picture of the existing reality undistorted. This bridge of understanding with common people of the country can go a long way in resolving the crisis of Assam and the north-east as upholding the mandate that it is a people's perspective that should inform our understanding and interpretation of movements, events and instruments. ❑

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assamese
search for a national identity

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Questions of nation, nationality and language have become so complex these days that it has become very difficult to define them. Even if many an authority has tried to theorise them from various perspectives we are still far from having a comprehensive understanding of these. The interpretations and re-interpretations have only lead to dissents. And this in turn is giving rise to sectarianism and secessionism.

But what is nation? How is it formed? And when the idea appeared in history?

In short, a nation is a historically constituted community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory and economic life. The psychological make-up of a community so formed is manifested in common culture. Wherever these elements have coalesced, the process of nation-building has started. While integration and mutual exchange of ideas among the groups accelerate the process, misunderstanding among them make the whole process thorny. Actually nation-building is facilitated by such a dynamics only. A nation which does not accord equal status to the language and culture of the minority groups within it cannot claim to be a nation. Respect for democratic values is also crucial. Bishnuprasad Rabha, revolutionary artist and politician, writes in his essay 'Janajatia Sanskritit Siva' (Siva in tribal culture): 'For a nation to integrate itself with another one, both should know each other wholeheartedly. Besides the knowledge of one's own religion, culture and society, one should also have sound knowledge of others' religion, culture and society. Without a deeper understanding, many complex issues might remain unresolved, which would in turn become hurdles in the way of progress.'

The very idea of nation or nationality is relatively a new one. Because it emerges in a capitalist society only. Before the advent of capitalism there was no such idea as nation. It was only during the Renaissance that this idea took shape. The Renaissance turned man's attention to this world and market economy come to be identified as the harbinger of social progress. The ensuing socio-political and economic changes sowed the seeds of nationalism and democracy as we know them to-day.

However, our idea of nation and ethnicity sometimes become very confusing as many use them interchangingly. The word nation is often used to denote different meanings. Some even try to define it in terms of religions, while others seek to correlate it with language. Concepts like religious nationalism and linguistic nationalism are the outcome of this endeavour.

Many an Assamese thinker has sought to define Assamese nationality in the past.

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Hem Chandra Baruah, the nineteenth century reformer and lexicographer, who compiled *Hemkosha* cited the example of Ahom nation and Hindu nation in the context of Assamese nation. Writing about the migration of the Ahoms to Assam, he commented that with the kings embracing Hinduism, the ordinary Ahoms were not only assimilated with the caste Hindu, they also forgot their language.

Banikanta Kakati, the eminent scholar and literary critic, sought to include caste into his idea of nationality. Therefore he wrote *Kalita Jatir Itibritta* (History of Kalita caste). Similarly Harinarayan Dutta Baruah wrote a history of the Kayasthas. One might assume from this that the Kayasthas are a nation. But it is only a caste.

Lakshminath Bezbaruah, the father of modern Assamese literature, considered both the elements – language and culture, when thinking about nationality. Assamese nation was formed on the foundation of the Satras, he thought. According to him, various communities living in the state were culturally united under the Satras and a common language evolved in due course. He wrote that the Satras were binding the Assamese people with a religious thread and were subjected to the lasting social values irrespective of their social status.



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On the other hand, Ambikagiri Raichoudhury, the doyen of Assamese nationalism held that those who spoke the Assamese language were the Assamese. He wished to assimilate the outsiders who spoke the Assamese language with the Assamese society.

But what mainly constitutes a nation? Does the claim that language play a central role in nation-building still hold good? This is the most serious question in the present day context.

The history of formation of the Assamese nation is of recent origin. It was only after the conquest of Assam by the British that the process began. Prior to that, the whole area was dotted with a number of small kingdoms including the Ahoms. A vast area of the present day Assam was left out of the Ahom kingdom. Even some areas of Kamrup were excluded from it. The ethnic communities living in these kingdoms had distinct cultures. There were disputes among them too. Quite naturally they fought against each other. But after the British conquest, the whole area underwent a sea change and the political map was redrawn. The ethnic communities living in the Pre-British Assam were thus included in the new Assam created by the British administration. They were united by the capitalist economic structure that the colonial power introduced. And this started the integration process. Even though the British rule had thwarted the formation of national capital in this region, it accelerated the process of integration. In due course, the erstwhile Goalpara district also became a part of the present day Assam. It is important to note here that Assamese speakers were a minority at that time. However, they became a majority group in due course. The language saw a significant development since the beginning of the twentieth century.

With the change of the map, the demography of the region was transformed too. The British brought here labourers from outside to work in the tea plantations. These labourers did not belong to a particular community. In fact, they belonged to communities like Menda, Chanthal, Orang, Chaara, Ghatoal, Janti, Kurmi, Mahanti, Bhumis, etc. They were brought from different regions, who had their

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own languages and distinct cultures. However, a common language had evolved among them in due course. Similarly, the British also facilitated the immigration of Muslims from neighbouring Bengal. These immigrant Muslims have now been integrated with the Assamese society and they have enriched us in many ways.

It would not be wrong to compare the idea of nation to an onion. A nation should be viewed as a whole of its constituting elements, not in its fragments. Otherwise, there would be no entity such as a nation as there would be no onion if one keeps peeling it.

As far as this writer can remember, it was Benudhar Sarmah, the noted historian, who used this simile while writing about the formation of a nation. Anthropologist Bhuban Mohan Das's observation is worth mentioning here. He writes that no race in the world is pure in the true sense of the word. This has been the rule since ancient times. Archaeology and Anthropology provide abundant examples of this.

A nation is always changing with times and developing. It is formed in a particular political and geographical context. Sankaradeva, the medieval Vaisnavite saint and social reformer, visualised this region both as Kamrup and as Asom. Perhaps the cultural differences between them have prompted him to think this way. Such was the political and geographical context at that time. The British used the word Assamese to denote the people living here. The word 'Asomiya' is an offshoot of that word. Assam would have been a different land together had not the British colonised it. Many areas now included in the state would have remained outside of its present political map.

A section of Assamese intelligentsia who are dissatisfied with the present state of affairs claim that Assam was never a part of India before 1826. They also maintain that there was no communication between India and Assam before that period. Thus they push forward the demand for an independent Assam. Suffice it to say, those who are devoid of a sense of history can only make such a demand. Ironically, the intellectuals who have been vehemently pushing forward this demand has their roots in North-India! They are not even sure of pre-1826 Assam they have been talking about. One is tempted to remind them with the words of Lakshminath Bezbaruah. He wrote that the Assamese language and the Assamese people, were a synthesis of many races coming from different lands. This is why the social bonding of Assamese society is relatively looser than other parts of India.

Borrowing from Bezbaruah, it can be pointed out that the Assamese language is not exclusive to any particular community. Passing through various stages over a very long period of time the language has reached its present status. Even though Assamese has its roots in Sanskrit and Pali, it is greatly influenced by the local dialects. Various tribal dialects and languages of the state such as Bodo, Karbi, Dimasa, Tiwa, Tai, Mishing, Rabha, etc. have enriched it. According to noted linguist Upendra Nath Goswami, since ancient times the dialects of the state have been enriching the Assamese language and have made it a synthetic one. He writes that Assamese is the language of integration and is spoken all over the state. And being the common medium of communication since ancient times, it has been emotionally unifying the state. It was enriched in the past during the rule of Barahi-Kachari, Kamata, Koch and Ahom kings. Therefore, it is dear to everybody living in the hills and the plains.

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Arabic and Persian words are another noteworthy addition to the Assamese language. Persian had an early impact on the language as the area was ruled by the Mughals before the conquest of the British. After that, English words also found place in it.

Needless to say, the development of a language is thwarted by those who see it with a myopic vision. With the changes in society a language itself changes too. Can one expect a language to be a medium of social harmony if the grammarian and the lexicographers fail to correlate the changes in the society with the language? A person is likely to be disappointed if he does not find even a single word of his language in our dictionary. For example, the Pati Rabhas speak a dialect whose vocabulary is full of Kamrupi and Goalparia words. So, what is the difficulty in including these words in our dictionary? The English language has enriched itself by borrowing from other languages. A language prospers when its lexicographers and grammarians react to wider socio-cultural changes with an open mind. This, in turn, speeds up integration.

(B)

As we are now acquainted with the ideas of nation and language we can now proceed to discuss what nationality is and its role in the society.

Nationality is grown when people, irrespective of their language and culture feel a sense of unity among them. Language is not the sole element for the formation of a nation in today's world, especially in the multicultural states. And the same applies to religion. Pakistan was formed following the two-nation theory but it could not remain united, it was divided at last. On the other hand, India and Nepal did not become a single nation because of religious similarity. It is almost impossible to find a homogeneous society in today's world. The culture and characteristics of the people vary from place to place. However, the divisions are narrowed down when the unity in the diversity finds expression. For example, the Ahom state was multilingual in nature. There were various groups among the Bodos also. But these divisions are losing these days. Even though the Bodo-Kacharis spoke of their distinct culture before the Simon Commission in 1928-29, they introduced themselves as Assamese. They said, 'The Bodos have a distinct civilization of their own. We the Bodos can by no means call us other than Assamese.' Their Assameseness was not identifiable with the Assamese language. Lakshminath Bezbaruah did not exclude the tribal people from his scheme of things when he sang *Ami Asomiya Nahao Dukhiya* (we the Assamese are not poor). Similar was the view of Jyoti Prasad, the great visionary artist and social thinker of twentieth century Assam. He regarded everybody living in Assam as Assamese. Bishnu Rabha compared the culture and literature of Assam to the vastness of the Brahmaputra. Bhimbar Deuri, who was one of the foremost leaders of tribal movement in Assam, did not forget to mention that the tribals were an integral part of the Assamese society. He fought bravely against the backwardness of the tribals.

Democratic development of a nation requires granting equal rights to all. In other words, a respect for diversity is very essential.

But what do we see in case of Assam?

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The nationalists quite often demand that anybody living in Assam must speak Assamese. This language based definition of nationality has been the driving force for the Assamese nationalism for quite a long time.

To be frank, the crisis of Assamese nationality is very much rooted in this demand. *Asom Sahitya Sabha*, the flag-bearing organisation of Assamese nationalism, has been supporting this for a long time.

Ambikagiri Ray Choudhury wrote that the Assamese wanted to assimilate the outsiders living for a long time in the state with its custom and language. Response to this endeavour would be a sign of greatness on their part, opposition to it would show their parochialism.

On the other hand, Gnanadabhiram Baruah, said in his 1933 presidential address of the *Asom Sahitya Sabha* that the Assamese language would be popularised among the Maymanshinia who had migrated to Assam and settled down here. Assamese should be properly taught in the schools in these areas. Similarly Ananda Chandra Agarwala commented in his *Asom Sahitya Sabha* presidential address in 1934 that it would be difficult to grow nationality if the people of a particular land were not monolingual. According to him the Miris, the Mikirs and the Nagas living in the plains had embraced the Assamese language. Therefore, Assamese should be popularised among the tea tribes, the tribals and the outsiders settling here. In his presidential address of the Sabha in 1958, Padmadhar Chaliha urged the tribals to embrace the Assamese language for the interest of a greater Assamese nation. In other words, these champions of Assamese nationalism wholeheartedly expected the tribal people as well as the outsiders living in the state to learn Assamese.

Even some leading freedom fighters were not ready to accept the distinct character of the tribals. Leaders like Kuladhar Chaliha had vehemently protested against the proposal to grant autonomy to the tribals. He said, 'If you allow them to rule us or run the administration, it will be negation of justice or administration, it will be sometime like anarchy.' Ruhini Kumar Baruah, one of the members of the constitutional council, said that if such power was accorded to the tribals, they would secede from India and would join Tibet or Burma.

Did not they sense the feelings of the tribal community? Though a few belonging to the tribal middle class were convinced by their rhetoric, the mass of the tribal community did not adopt the Assamese language. It became apparent in the thirties of the last century. Mahichandra Miri, the prominent figure of the Mishing community, pointed out in *Chetana*, the magazine edited by Ambikagiri Ray Choudhury, that there were many tribal communities on the border areas of the state who had their own languages and dialects. And their educated offspring did not wish to assimilate with others learning behind their dialects.

Miri was one of the tribal leaders who met the Simon Commission. He represented the Miris. The other members of the delegation representing various communities were Sonadhar Das (Baniya Samaj), Rai Pyari Mohan Das (Mahisyas), Nilakanta Hazarika (Kaibarta), Jogesh Chandra Nath (Jogi), Yadav Chandra Khakhlari (Kachari), Kalicharan Brahma (Bodo), Mahendra Lal Das (Lalung and Miris) and Ramesh Chandra Das. The plight of the tribals was clearly stated in the memorandum they submitted to the Commission. Their main demand was regarding

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on education. Because no initiative was taken in those days to spread education among the tribals, the front-ranking leaders of erstwhile Assam paid no attention to the pleas of these tribal leaders. It is worth recalling here that Bishnu Prasad Rabha had once reminded the political and social leaders of Assam that they should devote their time to uplift the backward communities of the state. He predicted that the delay on their part could pave the way for civil war in the state. The present situation is enough to prove his prophecy.

Why do we want an Assamese nationality? Is it for dominating the other ethnic communities or for building an integrated nation? Our future will depend on the answer to this question.

Conclusion

Defining a nation in the context of present bourgeois economy has become somewhat difficult. People have been migrating from country to country since ancient times for economic reason. This was further accelerated during the colonial period.

The crisis of capitalism is here to see. The darkest side of capitalist economy lies in its inherent economic difference. The lopsided development we see across regions is a result of present day capitalist economy. The situation is particularly grim in third world countries like ours. Like many other regions of the country, economic difference has made the situation worse in Assam too. As a result, it is becoming a breeding ground for secessionism of every description. But no section of our society is expected to wholeheartedly support these ideas in the present context. However, the possibility of a vibrant nation is rooted in a society free of exploitation, perhaps no one would deny this. Linguistic differences cannot be a serious problem if the thinking and objectives have an unity. To put it differently : if the language is same but the thinking and objectives are parochial in nature, it would not help build a nation. Integration is the only option in case of questions regarding nation, nationality and language in the present context.

Jyoti Prasad said, 'There can be no war between cultures, there is war against evil forces only.'❑



Gautom K. Borah is a journalist who has wide interest in socio-cultural topics. He has worked in various capacities in The North East Times and Natun Dainik, an Assamese daily. He has regularly contributed to various newspapers and magazines and co-edited a number of volumes also.

***Translated by* Gautom K. Borah**

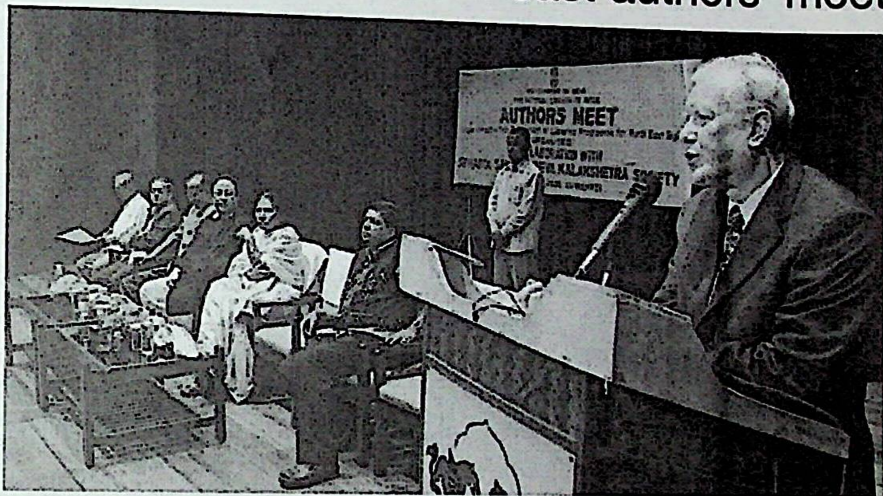
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Sudarshan Thakur

north-east authors' meet



At the formal inauguration

It was on a special occasion that some of the most promising and famous writers and poets of the North Eastern states of India gathered in a marathon two-day residential writers' meet at Guwahati, sponsored by the National Library, Kolkata, and organized by Srimanta Sankaradeva Kalakshetra, Guwahati.

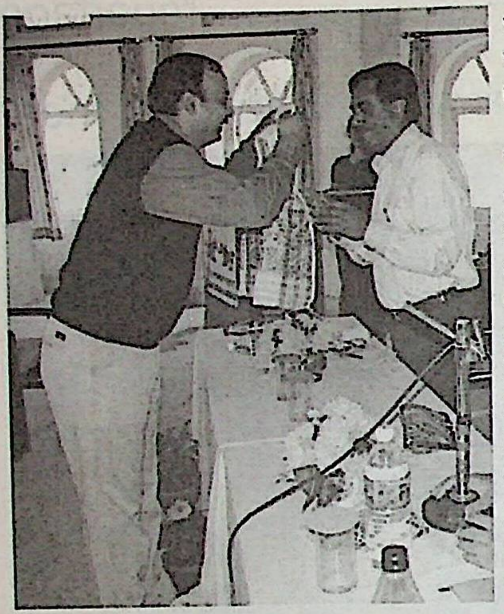
The participants from all the N E States came and stayed together in a friendly atmosphere vibrant with open interactions and free exchange of ideas. The whole meet, planned and coordinated by Assamese novelist Dr. D.J. Borah, was therefore largely unstructured, keeping formal occasions and lectures to the minimum but facilitating the writers and poets to express themselves without restraint, to talk about their feelings and experiences. There was more story and poetry reading sessions than anything else. After the ice breaking session the authors opened up, there was no holding back and the whole meet became a friendly interactive process.



The participating authors from the different states were Sri Yumlembam Ibomcha Singh and Sri Sarat Chandra Thiyam from Manipur, Dr. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Sri Robin S. Ngangon and Paul Lingdoh from Meghalaya, Sri Mona Zote and Sri P.L. Liandinga from Mizoram, Sri Budharoy Debaverma and Sri Minakshi Sen from Tripura, Sri Vipin Patsani from Arunachal Pradesh and Sri Pankaj Thapa from Sikkim.

From the neighbouring state of West Bengal the

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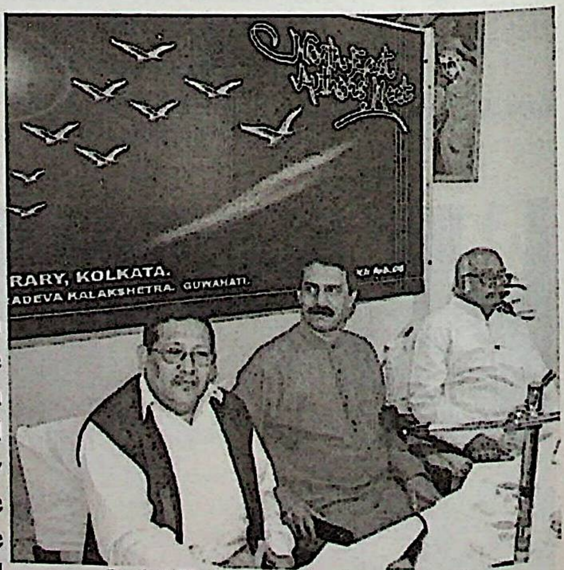
very popular and sensitive poet Mandakanta Sen and well-known fiction writer Abhijit Tarafdar also joined the meet and read out their own writings.

The contingent from Assam was in two tiers. Some young yet established writers participated as delegates in the meet and they actively took part in all the activities. The first group included Sri Jayanta Kumar Chakravarty, Dr. Rabin Sarma, Sri Sibananda Kakoti, Sri Arindam Borkatati, Sri Sananta Tanty, Ismail Hossain, Sri Anubhav Tulasi, Sri Nilim Kumar, Sri Hridyananda Gogoi, Dr. Anil Kumar Boro, Sri Rajeev Baruah, Sri Debaprasad Talukdar, Sri Saurav Saikia and Sri Chinmoy Kr. Das. The second tier was made up of young writers and poets of promise who were invited to participate as audience participants, to hear the famous North East writers presenting their creations and viewpoints. In the last session these promising youngsters also presented their own creations before the assembly. The second group include Sri Suresh Ranjan Goduka, Sri Samindra Hujuri, Sri Ratna Bharali Talukdar, Sri Ankur Ranjan Changmai, Sri Kamal Kumar Medhi, Sri Kushal Dutta, Sri Tirthajyoti Borah, Sri Robin Bhuyan, Sri Lakshmindra Kumar Sinha, Sri Tridib Borpuzari, Jyotshna Kalita and Monika Devee.

A galaxy of literary personalities from Assam including Professor Prabhat Borah, Professor Pradip Acharya, Novelist Nirupama Borgohain, Dr. Nagen Saikia, Poet Hirendranath Dutta, Senior journalist Radhikamohan Bhagawati, Writer Pankaj Thakur, Writer Dhruba Hazarika and Senior writer and critic Dr. Gobindra Prasad Sharma.chaired different reading sessions, lectures, symposium and special open air poetry reading sessions.

Prominent journalist Sri Nitya Borah was invited as speaker to talk on 'Journalism and Literature' and he delivered a valuable speech on the inter-relationship between literature and journalism of today.

In the short inaugural session held towards the evening of the first day, Dr. (Mrs) Hemo Prava Saikia, the Minister for Cultural Affairs, Assam, formally inaugural the meet in presence of the senior officials of the National Library, Kolkata. Noted



Pankaj Thakur, Dhurba Hazarika and Radhika Mohan Bhagawati

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poet and writer Sri Harekrishna Deka called for formation of a North Eastern Sahitya Akademi for providing encouragement and a meaningful platform to the writers of the North East.

In the keynote address, Dr. D.J. Borah appealed to the writers' fraternity of this region to bond with their rich cultural heritage and search their roots. 'The region's Oral Literature is a treasure trove bestowed on us by our ancestors... This can be the Muse to all the creative and upcoming writers of the region,' he observed.

As an example of this, Dr. Borah recounted of his pleasant


Dr. Nagen Saikia


Nirupama Borgohain


Hirendranath Dutta


G.P. Sharma


Pradip Acharya


Prabhat Borah


Nitya Borah


Abhijit Tarafdar


Robin S.Ngangon


Paul Lingdoh


K.S. Nongkynrih


P.L. Liandinga

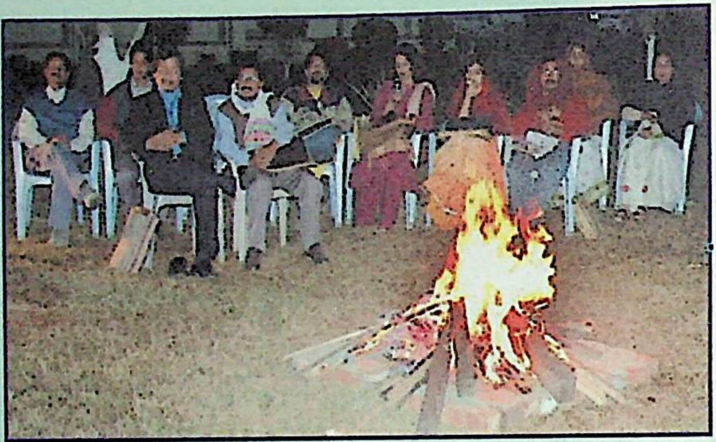

Minakshi Sen


B.R. Debaverma


Mona Zote


Mandakanta Sen

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Authors around the bonfire



Rabin Sarma



J.K.Chakravarty



Sibananda Kakoti



Arindam Borkatati



Sananta Tanty



Anubhav Tulasi



Nilim Kumar



Rajeev Baruah



Ismail Hossain

personal experiences while composing his novel *Aranya Jatra*. Felicitating the visiting delegates from the different parts of the North Eastern States said Sri Goutom Sharma, Secretary of Srimanta Sankaradeva Kalakshetra that the Kalakshetra Society hopes to organise such meets frequently in the future for building bridges between the North Eastern states.

The authors and poets who assembled and participated in the two-day literary festival are mostly the new literary voices of the different North Eastern states who represent the modernist and at times the post-modernist trends of their states.



The delegates of the N-E Authors' meet assembled in the sylvian surroundings of Srimanta Sankaradeva Kalakshetra

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assamese school of painting



Kirtan- Na-burka Sattra, Kamrup



Samiran Boruah *is a top-ranking artist and writer. He has to his credit 10 solo and 16 group painting exhibitions. He has published 21 articles in Assamese and 16 in English. He has authored a book title The Name of the Rose and Other Essays.*



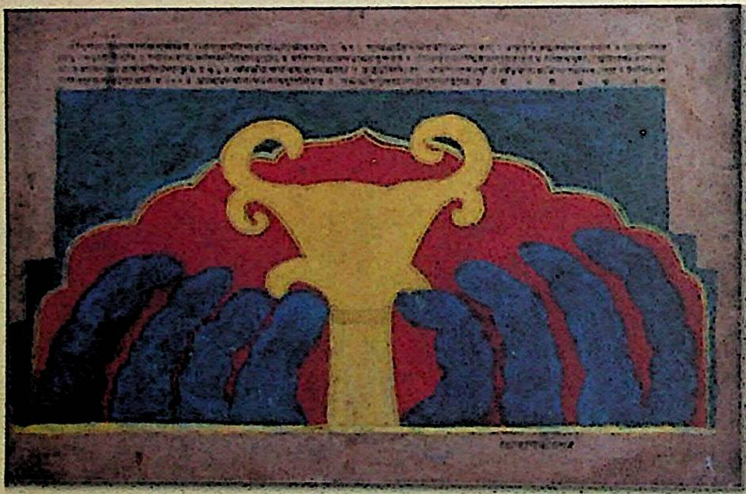
Sundara Kanda Ramayan - Chaliha Bareghar Sattra, Sivsagar

Very few people know that Assam occupies a unique position in the history of Indian art by representing one of the earliest indigenous Kalams, which has survived till the middle of the last century. We know of that tradition from a good number of illustrated manuscripts, which are found scattered in private collections and institutions across Assam. It is also not very well known that the tradition of manuscript writing of Assam is one of the oldest of its kind in

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Kirtan- Kathbapu Sattra, Jorhat



Anadipatan, Kuji Sattra, Nagaon



Brihad Usha Haran- Budhabari Sattra, Sivsagar

India. From Bana's Harshacharita, (7th century A.D.) it is known that the gift from Bhaskarbarma, the king of ancient Assam, to Harsha, included, inter alia, 'volumes of fine writing with leaves made from aloe bark and of the hue of ripe pink cucumber.' This is the first direct and clear reference of manuscripts belonging to a Hindu kingdom of India. It is clear from the contemporary Greek account, now lost but quoted in later sources, of Alexander's invasion of Punjab that Indians used the inner bark of trees and well-beaten cotton cloth as writing materials. It has been unanimously accepted by the scholars that the inner bark referred to in the account is the inner bark of the common birch Betula utilis, known as bhujapattra. However, the existence of a well documented tradition of making manuscript from the inner bark of aloe tree known as sanchipat, in Assam as early as the 7th century might indicate that the Greeks were aware of this tradition too when they referred to the ancient Indian writing process. The other material referred to in the Greek account

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namely the cotton cloth has also been in use in Assam for a long time. The present author has actually documented such a manuscript on Muga silk. Another important writing material of Assam is handmade paper made from pressed cotton, which is commonly known as tulapat. According to Hemchandra Goswami (Descriptive catalogue of Assamese manuscripts, University of Calcutta, 1930) tulapat was 'used for inferior manuscripts, for letters, for private document, and for official orders, despatches and records.' It has been generally accepted that paper was introduced in India by the Turks after their conquest of North India in the 13th century. But there are concrete evidences, revealed by the discovery of a large cache of paper manuscripts in Gilgit, that papermaking was practised in India as early as the 6th century AD.

It is known from Bana's account that in Assam there was a tradition of painting miniature pictures. But there is no clear indication about illustrated manuscript in his account. Most of the scholars on Indian art believe that it is only from the 16th century that the Hindus started illustrating their manuscripts, long after the Buddhists and the Jains. But from Jeremiah P. Losty's account (The Art of the Book in India, The British Library) it is known that there was a Hindu tradition of manuscript illustration in Nepal as early as 12th century AD. So the existence of such a Hindu tradition in Assam in an earlier date cannot be ruled out.

One of the most significant things about the Assamese manuscript is that the calligraphic elegance was considered as an important part of it. As a result, four stylistically distinct types of Assamese scripts have evolved in different Assamese manuscripts. They were a)Gargaiyan, b)Bamunia, c) Lahkari and c) Kaitheli. In this context it may be mentioned here that in the rest of India it is only from the 18th century, that too under the direct influence of the Mughal court, that the Hindus took the calligraphic excellence seriously.

The present author has made a documentation of the illustrated manuscripts extant mostly in private collections in Assam. The documentation, so far made, of the Assamese manuscript and the initial studies of the paintings contained in those manuscripts reveals that there existed two distinct schools of the paintings of Assam. Most of the paintings of the 17th century can be grouped together for their common features and they share some of the characteristics with the early western Indian tradition. Regarding the Bhagavata of Bali Satra, a well known Assamese illustrated manuscript which shows similar characteristics with the above group of manuscripts, Moti Chandra ('Reviews' in the Journal of the University of Gauhati, Vol. V, 1954) remarked that the paintings of the Bali Satra Bhagavata are similar to eighteenth century Nepal scroll and Bengal paintings. The documented paintings of the above group will prove Chandra's view wrong. A comparison with some of the published 18th century Nepali and Bengali paintings show that the Assamese paintings are by far closer to the 15th and 16th century North Indian tradition rather than the 18th century paintings of Nepal and Bengal.

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It may be pointed out here that many scholars believe that the North Indian style of painting has originated from the western Indian tradition. In this regards Karl J. Khandalavala and Moti Chandra had opined that the western Indian or Gujarati school was not a localized mode of expression confined only to Gujarat, Rajasthan, Malwa and Jaunpur but had become a form of expression common to many parts of India (New Document of Indian Paintings, Prince of Wales Museum) . The exact structural similarities of the compositions of some of the Assamese paintings of the above group with that of the Laur-Chanda (1450-1475AD) and Mrigavat (1525-1570AD) of Bharat Kala Bhavan proves beyond doubt that they have originated from the same tradition. But at the same time, some of the most conspicuous peculiarities of the Assamese paintings prove that the Assamese school had originated before the Persian influence became vogue in North India.

It is very significant that Bana in Harshacharita has mentioned that the gifts from Bhaskarvarma, the 7th century king of Kamrupa (present day Assam) to King Harsha has included a pair of wooden panels, to one side of which were attached colour pots of small gourds and brushes. Now there could be only one interpretation for the existence of these were that they were definitely used for painting miniatures. It proves that there was a tradition of small paintings in Assam as early as the 7th century AD. It is curious that most of the scholars of Indian paintings have so far evaded such an interpretation.

The documented 17th century manuscripts are undoubtedly the remnants of an old tradition. Some of the similarities of the Assamese paintings with those of the Western Indian and the Northern Indian schools may indicate that a more or less common style was popular in many parts of India during 7th century. It is possible to compare a few more manuscripts of North India with the 17th century paintings of Assam. In Aranyaka Parvan (1516AD) we find that the compositions are often staked in several panels one on top of the other in the same folio. In some of the Assamese paintings too we find several panels in the same folios, though not in an exact fashion. Besides, the depiction of the four headed Brahma is similar in both the manuscripts. The Mahapurana from Palam (1540 AD) also share some common features with the Assamese paintings. Beside the similar palette, the almost identical male costume and the conventional ways of depicting the plants and animals are striking. In an early Ragamala of Bharat Kala Bhavan (1575AD) also we find similar male costume. The turban depicted in this Ragamala is an indication that the so-called Akbari atpati turban, which abounds in Assamese paintings and which most of the scholars wants to associate with the Mughal school has really been in existence in Indian art form prior to the existence of the Mughal school. This view is further substantiated by the presence of an atpati type turban in a Sunga sculpture, the photograph of which was reproduced by Moti Chandra. (Pracin Bharat Ki Vesbhusa, Bharati Bhandar, Prayag,). Norman Brown also reproduced a photograph of the 11th century sculpture bearing three male figures two of which were shown with turbans exactly similar to the so-called atpati turban (Early Vaisnava Miniature

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paintings from Western India, Eastern Art,Vol-11,1930).

Most of the scholars who have discussed the Assamese manuscript paintings want to associate the turban of the Assamese paintings with the Mughal paintings. But they fail to see that except the turban no other elements of the Assamese paintings can be even remotely associated with the Mughal School. Conversely, there are many elements in the Assamese paintings, which are not found in the Mughal School or the Late Rajasthani School. Those who are really aware of the workings of the influences in the art forms will agree that it is not just simply picking up an element or two from the foreign source. In this case it is even more absurd to think that the Assamese painters have chosen just the turban, which is quite insignificant visually or from pictorial perspective, and ignored all the rich and fabulous attributes of the Mughal School.

The convention of the Assamese paintings of placing figures under arched canopies is also leading many scholars to wrong conclusions. They want to associate this tradition with the Buddhist paintings of the Pala School. But this convention also exists in the Western Indian tradition. In the manuscript of Sardhashataka (c.1125-1150 AD) and Mahapurana from Palam (1540 AD) similar arched canopies are noticed. It is also noteworthy that we find similar convention in some rock cut sculptures of Assam belonging to the 10th –11th century AD. On the other hand, the canopies are not always arched in the Assamese paintings. In many cases they are angular, forming step like pattern. In other cases, the canopies are rudimentary and exist just as a decorative element rather than for providing niches over the figures.

It is most likely that even though some of the documented manuscripts have been done in the 17th century, they really represent a very old tradition which is more closer to the Western Indian tradition. This can be supported by the existence of a particular manuscript, namely Anadipatan. This manuscript is probably done towards the end of the 17th century or the early 18th century. In this manuscript we find quite a good number of abstract paintings. This is quite unique in the sense that nowhere in India similar abstract visualisation is found except in the illustration of the Jain manuscript Trailokya Dipika with which it shares some remote connection. Both these manuscripts deal with the cosmology. But the illustrations of Trailokya Dipika are mostly like mathematical drawings lacking any organic and visual quality. In contrast, the illustrations of Anadipatan are quite organic and exceptionally rich in pictorial quality enabling them to stand independently without the aid of their intended signification. But the important point is that both the Jaina and Assamese manuscripts belonging to two areas separated by a vast geographical expanse, deal with the same subject and in both cases the illustrations are abstract in nature. Absence of any such manuscript in the adjacent areas in between them, indirectly points to a very spread common tradition, which has been destroyed in the turbulent North-Central India and

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It may be pointed out here that many scholars believe that the North Indian style of painting has originated from the western Indian tradition. In this regards Karl J. Khandalavala and Moti Chandra had opined that the western Indian or Gujarati school was not a localized mode of expression confined only to Gujarat, Rajasthan, Malwa and Jaunpur but had become a form of expression common to many parts of India (New Document of Indian Paintings, Prince of Wales Museum) . The exact structural similarities of the compositions of some of the Assamese paintings of the above group with that of the Laur-Chanda (1450-1475AD) and Mrigavat (1525-1570AD) of Bharat Kala Bhavan proves beyond doubt that they have originated from the same tradition. But at the same time, some of the most conspicuous peculiarities of the Assamese paintings prove that the Assamese school had originated before the Persian influence became vogue in North India.

It is very significant that Bana in Harshacharita has mentioned that the gifts from Bhaskarvarma, the 7th century king of Kamrupa (present day Assam) to King Harsha has included a pair of wooden panels, to one side of which were attached colour pots of small gourds and brushes. Now there could be only one interpretation for the existence of these were that they were definitely used for painting miniatures. It proves that there was a tradition of small paintings in Assam as early as the 7th century AD. It is curious that most of the scholars of Indian paintings have so far evaded such an interpretation.

The documented 17th century manuscripts are undoubtedly the remnants of an old tradition. Some of the similarities of the Assamese paintings with those of the Western Indian and the Northern Indian schools may indicate that a more or less common style was popular in many parts of India during 7th century. It is possible to compare a few more manuscripts of North India with the 17th century paintings of Assam. In Aranyaka Parvan (1516AD) we find that the compositions are often staked in several panels one on top of the other in the same folio. In some of the Assamese paintings too we find several panels in the same folios, though not in an exact fashion. Besides, the depiction of the four headed Brahma is similar in both the manuscripts. The Mahapurana from Palam (1540 AD) also share some common features with the Assamese paintings. Beside the similar palette, the almost identical male costume and the conventional ways of depicting the plants and animals are striking. In an early Ragamala of Bharat Kala Bhavan (1575AD) also we find similar male costume. The turban depicted in this Ragamala is an indication that the so-called Akbari atpati turban, which abounds in Assamese paintings and which most of the scholars wants to associate with the Mughal school has really been in existence in Indian art form prior to the existence of the Mughal school. This view is further substantiated by the presence of an atpati type turban in a Sunga sculpture, the photograph of which was reproduced by Moti Chandra. (Pracin Bharat Ki Vesbhusa, Bharati Bhandar, Prayag,). Norman Brown also reproduced a photograph of the 11th century sculpture bearing three male figures two of which were shown with turbans exactly similar to the so-called atpati turban (Early Vaisnava Miniature

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paintings from Western India, Eastern Art,Vol-11,1930).

Most of the scholars who have discussed the Assamese manuscript paintings want to associate the turban of the Assamese paintings with the Mughal paintings. But they fail to see that except the turban no other elements of the Assamese paintings can be even remotely associated with the Mughal School. Conversely, there are many elements in the Assamese paintings, which are not found in the Mughal School or the Late Rajasthani School. Those who are really aware of the workings of the influences in the art forms will agree that it is not just simply picking up an element or two from the foreign source. In this case it is even more absurd to think that the Assamese painters have chosen just the turban, which is quite insignificant visually or from pictorial perspective, and ignored all the rich and fabulous attributes of the Mughal School.

The convention of the Assamese paintings of placing figures under arched canopies is also leading many scholars to wrong conclusions. They want to associate this tradition with the Buddhist paintings of the Pala School. But this convention also exists in the Western Indian tradition. In the manuscript of Sardhashataka (c.1125-1150 AD) and Mahapurana from Palam (1540 AD) similar arched canopies are noticed. It is also noteworthy that we find similar convention in some rock cut sculptures of Assam belonging to the 10th –11th century AD. On the other hand, the canopies are not always arched in the Assamese paintings. In many cases they are angular, forming step like pattern. In other cases, the canopies are rudimentary and exist just as a decorative element rather than for providing niches over the figures.

It is most likely that even though some of the documented manuscripts have been done in the 17th century, they really represent a very old tradition which is more closer to the Western Indian tradition. This can be supported by the existence of a particular manuscript, namely Anadipatan. This manuscript is probably done towards the end of the 17th century or the early 18th century. In this manuscript we find quite a good number of abstract paintings. This is quite unique in the sense that nowhere in India similar abstract visualisation is found except in the illustration of the Jain manuscript Trailokya Dipika with which it shares some remote connection. Both these manuscripts deal with the cosmology. But the illustrations of Trailokya Dipika are mostly like mathematical drawings lacking any organic and visual quality. In contrast, the illustrations of Anadipatan are quite organic and exceptionally rich in pictorial quality enabling them to stand independently without the aid of their intended signification. But the important point is that both the Jaina and Assamese manuscripts belonging to two areas separated by a vast geographical expanse, deal with the same subject and in both cases the illustrations are abstract in nature. Absence of any such manuscript in the adjacent areas in between them, indirectly points to a very spread common tradition, which has been destroyed in the turbulent North-Central India and

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survived in two extreme edges of India. Another significant aspect of the Assamese school is the representation of landscapes. In many cases the painting contains simply the landscape, a feature that is not found in other Indian schools.

The characteristics of the Assamese paintings of the 17th century can be listed as follows:

1. The general composition consists of a large central area, generally painted red, where the subjects are depicted and a narrow surrounding border in green or blue, broader at the top, forming a series of canopies over the central area. There is no attempt to differentiate the various planes. Though red is used as background colour almost invariably, yet in exceptional cases yellow, pink and blue are also used.

2. The male and female figures are always conventional and, except in the portrayal of Brahma, all figures are depicted in profile.

3. The male costume consists of a Dhoti and a scarf hanging from the neck with its two ends freely falling over the shoulders on either side. The female costume consists of a mekhala (long skirt) and a riha (scarf) tied round the waist and bosom that runs further behind to cover the hair knot forming a balloon like appearance.

4. The male headgear consists of three-pointed or four-pointed tiara in some cases and the atpati type turban.

5. The treatment of the landscape is always conventional. Water is always painted in basket pattern inside squares and rectangles. Trees are generally painted like the sprays. The mountains are depicted as piles of multicoloured convex bodies.

6. Depiction of animals and birds are both conventional and naturalistic.

7. The architecture is very simple consisting of the cross section view of the Assam-type house with roofs and supporting pillars. In many cases, instead of drawing the complete house simply the door is depicted. In rare cases even a single pillar is depicted independently.

8. The umbrella is almost always depicted as hanging from a hook like handle. The documented manuscripts of to the 18th century form a style in which the 17th century elements as well as the Rajput-Mughal elements have been found to converge in a unique manner. The flavour of the Rajput-Mughal idiom when translated from its vertical format to the horizontal format of the Assamese manuscript and being blended with the local idioms, they naturally resulted in a unique style. In this group of manuscripts, green seems to have

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replaced red as the background colour. Besides, many new shades of colour hitherto unknown to Assamese painters began to appear in most of the paintings.

The 17th century convention of dividing the composition in to the central area and surrounding border has been almost abandoned in this group of paintings. But here, an attempt to differentiate the various planes of the composition is clear. But in spite of this effort of defining perspective, most of the paintings lack the depth that is found in the Rajput-Mughal idioms. However, the solidity of the body is fairly achieved in the depiction of male and female figures. The male and female faces are depicted in different ways. Some are depicted in profile, some in three-quarter and others in their frontal view. The costume, particularly those of the female, became very elaborate and in many cases they became identical with the costume of late Rajasthani paintings. The plants and animals in this group of manuscripts are both conventional and naturalistic. Great varieties of flowering trees are found in some of the manuscripts of this group, which are truly unique and depicted in ornamented decorative pattern rather than like natural plants. The depiction of the hills and mountains is also different from the 17th century manuscripts. The architectural depiction is quite complex here borrowing elements from the Rajput-Mughal paintings. There are also instances where a new type of architecture has been found to evolve from such borrowing. But there are also instances where, instead of the complete building, simply the door is depicted following the 17th century convention. The chariots are depicted in many ways. In some cases they are like simple platform mounted on four wheels. In some cases they are elaborately decorated and are mounted on two wheels. While in some there are canopies overhead in others there are no such canopies. The umbrella is differently depicted in this group from that of the 17th century hanging type.

It must be borne in mind that the main purpose of the traditional paintings of Assam was to supplement the text of the manuscripts. In other words they were the illustrations of the texts. As such artists were basically concerned on the content of the texts. So instead of creating new meaning with form and colour they were content with the already existing meanings of the texts. It is now hard to detect how much the artists were inspired even by the text itself. Because in most cases artists' job was just to copy them from another manuscripts. There was a special class of people in Assam known as khanikar. They were both artist, and the craftsmen. Besides paintings, they also made idols in wood. It may be pointed out here that the word pratima was applied indiscriminately to both sculptures and paintings. Khanikar also made masks to be used for theatrical performance.

The scribe of the manuscript was usually a different person called Lekhak. Generally he did the writing first and left blank spaces to be filled with illustration later, by the

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Khanikar. Lekhaks were invariably literate persons. But some Khanikars were illiterate as well. But he could all the same copy paintings as well as writings. So it is obvious that some times Khanikars did the works without fully understanding the essence of the text. But as all the themes of the manuscripts were part of the general folklore tradition of Assam the Khanikars were not totally unfamiliar with them. However, to some extent such factors were also responsible in determining the nature and characteristics of the traditional Assamese paintings.

It is quite obvious from the above that for the full appreciation of the Assamese manuscript painting it is almost essential to know the accompanying texts of the manuscript. In many cases it is the text, which only gives the significance to the painting. Nevertheless there is always a kind of beauty in the Assamese manuscript paintings. It derives its beauty basically from its uniqueness and the provincial flavour of simplicity. When we contrast the Assamese paintings with those of the schools of late Rajasthani, Kangra, Mughal, etc. which are basically the product of urban cultures we may see the uniqueness of the Assamese paintings which are primarily a product of the village culture. Though some kings and queens of the late mediaeval Assam used to commission scribes and painters to prepare manuscripts yet there is no evidence to think that they had their own royal ateliers. The traditional scribes and painters who lived in the villages generally prepared manuscripts. It may be pointed out here that the materials for the Assamese manuscripts were mainly prepared from the bark of the Agar tree which are found only in the countryside. As the painters and scribes had to prepare the base materials for the manuscripts themselves, which involved a very long process, it was advantageous for them to do the work there itself. Besides painting was never been a viable profession in Assam. The traditional painters known as Khanikars had to depend for their livelihood basically on farming. So it was not possible for them to settle in urban centre near their clients to do the paintings exclusively. The Vaisnava monasteries, major centres for the production of manuscripts, were also situated away from the urban centres. The seclusion of the traditional painters away from the urban centres was a determining factor in shaping the style of the Assamese paintings. It also helped retain the characteristics, perhaps, of a very old tradition which had been abandoned elsewhere in India long before. ❑

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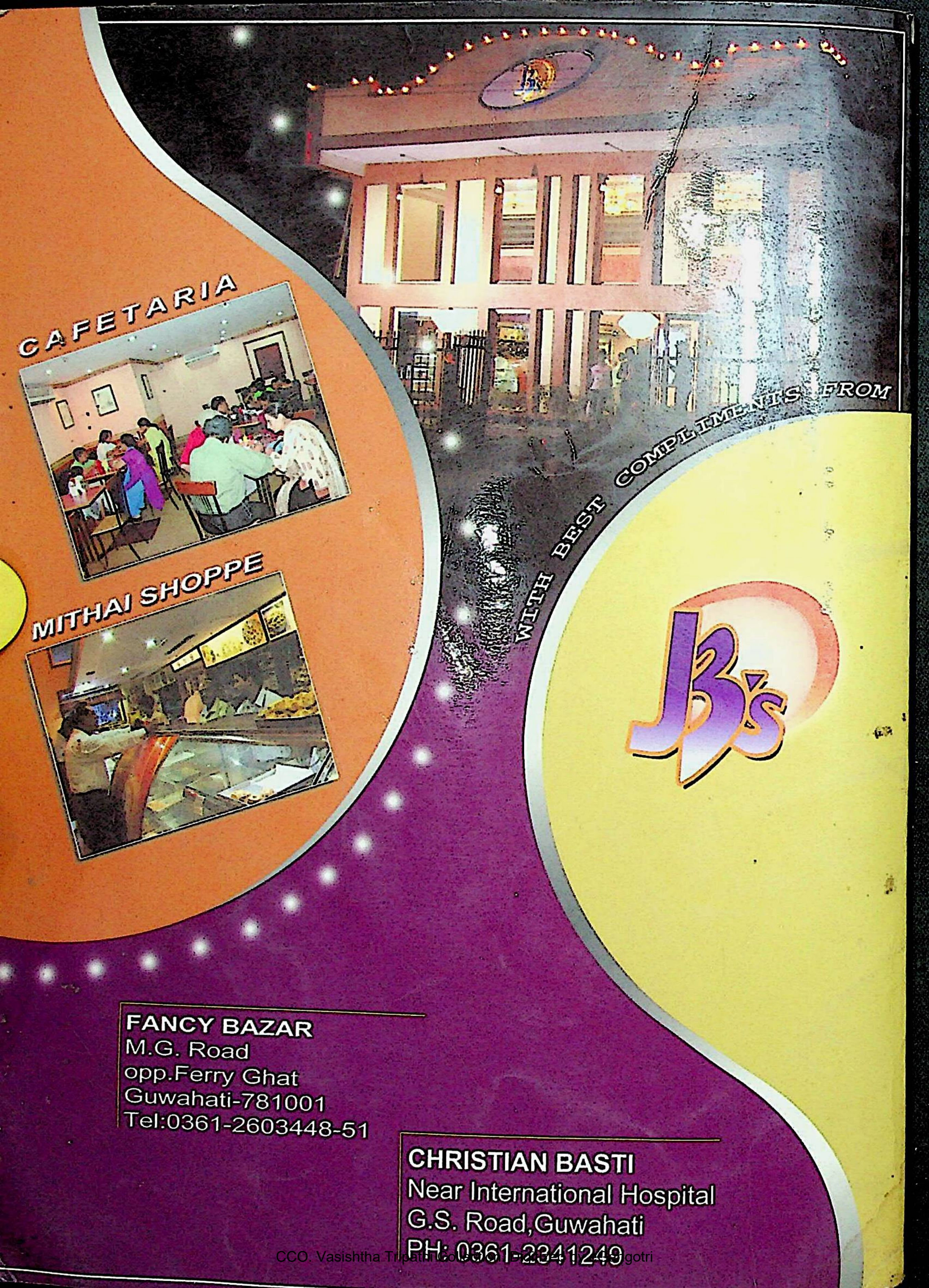
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- Corneas to be collected wirhin 6 hours of death.
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- Spectacle wearers, cross eyed persons, previously operated persons can also donate eyes.

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- Call the nearest Eye Bank immediately.
- Turn off the fan above the deceased body.
- Close both the eyes.
- Place moist cotton balls or a handkerchief with ice cubes in it, on both closed eyes.
- Raise the head with a couple of pillows.
- Keep the death certificate from a doctor ready.

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